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Note

Hello guys!

Wolfstripe here!

Welcome to the second book in my second arc - Rainfall!

Please, please, please take that half second of your time to vote and comment! It is REALLY appreciated! Especially for a small author like me.

I hope to be more thorough in my writing for this book. If you have any suggestions/ideas/feedback for me, I will gladly take it.

I hope you enjoy Rainfall!

Thank you!

Allegiances

LightningClan

Leader:

Stonestar - Gray tom with green eyes

Deputy:

Bouncestep - Black tom with yellow eyes [Apprentice: Sootpaw] (Temporary position)

Warriors:

Yellowgaze - Black she-cat with white splotches and yellow eyes [Temporary apprentice: Frostpaw]

Treefur - Light brown tom with one yellow eye and one brown eye [Apprentice: Ashpaw]

Longwhisker - Gray tabby tom with green eyes and long whiskers [Apprentice: Rainpaw]

Mousefoot - Cream tom with smaller paws and green eyes [Apprentice: Scorpionpaw]

Featherwing - Silver tabby and white she-cat with blue eyes

Snowberry - White she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentices:

Rainpaw - Dark gray tom with amber eyes [Mentor: Longwhisker]

Sootpaw - Dark gray tom and light blue eyes [Mentor: Bouncestep]

Ashpaw - Light gray she-cat with amber eyes [Mentor: Treefur]

Scorpionpaw - Cream tabby tom with green eyes [Mentor: Mousefoot]

Frostpaw - White she-cat with blue eyes and black tail-tip [Temporary Mentor: Yellowgaze]

Medicine Cat:

Flowerstorm - Calico she-cat with green eyes

Queens:

Ambersong - Gray she-cat with amber eyes with a white underbelly (Nursing Bouncestep's kits) Dawnkit - Really pale gray she-kit with yellow eyes

Sharpkit - Black tom-kit with yellow eyes

Tigerkit - Orange and black tabby tom-kit with amber eyes and white belly and chest plus black paws and white toes

Elders:

Yang - White tom with a black spot over eye with green eyes

BreezeClan

Leader:

Pebblestar - Gray she-cat with gray eyes

Deputy:

Redspots - White tom with red-brown spots and green eyes

Medicine Cat:

Cloudheart - White long-furred tom with green eyes

Warriors:

Waterdrop - Blue-gray she-cat with green eyes [Apprentice - Lionpaw]

Eaglecry - Gray she-cat with blue eyes - blind in one eye [Apprentice - Leopardpaw]

Birdjaw - Light gray she-cat with blue eyes [Apprentice - Tigerpaw]

Hollywing - Black she-cat with brown eyes

Apprentices:

Lionpaw - Red-brown fluffy tom with green eyes [Mentor - Waterdrop]

Tigerpaw - Red-brown fluffy tom with black stripes and brown eyes [Mentor - Birdjaw]

Leopardpaw - Black she-cat with green eyes and darker flecked spots [Mentor - Eaglecry]

Queens:

Foxskip - Orange she-cat with gray eyes (nursing Voleheart's kits)

Dustkit - Brown tabby tom-kit with gray eyes

Lilykit - Pale orange she-kit with gray eyes

Smokekit - Gray tom-kit with amber eyes

RainClan

Leader:

Whitestar - White tom with scar across back, green eyes

Deputy:

Crashclaw - Light gray tom with amber eyes

Medicine Cat:

Duskwaters - Tortoiseshell tom with green eyes

Medicine Cat Apprentice:

Rowanpaw/whisper - Gray tom with barely noticeable darker stripes and amber eyes (made apprentice 2 moons early due to desperate need of an apprentice)

Warriors:

Flailwhisper - Light gray she-cat with yellow eyes

Brackenstep - Bracken-colored tabby tom; amber eyes

Rabbitfoot - Cream tom with gray eyes

Queens:

Splashstream - White she-cat with gray eyes [Nursing Brackenstep's kits]

Songkit - Light bracken colored tabby she-kit with gray eyes

Jaykit - White tom-kit with amber eyes

Sandkit - Light bracken colored tom-kit with amber eyes

Slatefur - Gray she-cat with green eyes [Nursing Crashclaw's kit]

Cloudkit - Gray tabby she-kit with green eyes

Elders:

Tallwatcher - Black tom with white muzzle and chest, long legs with green eyes

GloomClan

Leader:

Emberstar - Pale flame-colored she-cat with blue eyes

Deputy:

Adderblaze - Brown tom with amber eyes

Medicine Cat:

Sparrowstep - Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Breezegorse - Black tom with green eyes

Hazelscar - Sand colored she-cat with green eyes and a scar across her neck

Brindletooth - Brindle tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Ravensong - Long-furred black tom with amber eyes

Smokestreak - Long-furred gray tom with lighter gray streaks; amber eyes

Shadowpelt - Long-furred black tom with yellow eyes

Queens:

Bumbleface - Brindle tabby she-cat with green eyes [Nursing Adderblaze's kits]

Echokit - Brown tabby she-kit with amber eyes

Whiskerkit - Brown tom-kit with amber eyes

Elders:

Tigerdusk - Dark gray tabby tom with amber eyes

CloudClan

Leader:

Heronstar - White and gray spotted tom with amber eyes

Deputy:

Blazewing - Red furred tom with pale green eyes

Medicine Cat:

River - Gray she-cat with light blue eyes

Warriors:

Dinselpelt - Cream long-furred she-cat with pale green eyes

Lynxtail - Long-haired brown tabby tom with cream underbelly and short tail, hairy ear tips, amber eyes

Queens:

Lilyfur - Ginger and cream she-cat with green eyes (Expecting Lynxtail's kits)

Elders:

Bramble - Really old brown tabby tom with amber eyes

CATS OUTSIDE THE CLANS

Nightwing - Dark gray she-cat with black spots and needle-like green eyes

Shadow - Long-furred black tom with yellow eyes, kittypet

Bella - Medium-haired gray and white chubby she-cat with green eyes, kittypet

Prologue

Rainpaw shuddered, it felt like someone was watching him. The unsteady breeze of leaf-bare's final chills ruffled his fur as he walked through the forest, aching for something to hunt. Technically, he wasn't supposed to be out on his own, but the need for some alone time was desperate.

He and his siblings were almost warriors, their assessment would be within the quarter-moon, and to be frank, he was terrified of failing. They have been training to become warriors for six moons, yet he still felt unprepared.

Rainpaw sighed and opened his jaws, waiting for the rich scent of prey to bathe his tongue. Some prey may come out early, eager to witness the arrival of newleaf. His jaws watered at the thought of plump prey, realizing that the prey that hope to see the beginning of newleaf, will only see a glimpse. Perhaps, even less.

A familiar scent blanketed Rainpaw's mouth. Closing them immediately, he looked around for any signs of intruders, or perhaps another apprentice playing a joke on him. Shaking his head, he opened his jaws again and gleamed with delight when he smelled a mouse. He walked around for a little until he spotted the fat mouse, sitting right outside its burrow and eating a cob nut. Determined, Rainpaw dropped into a hunting crouch and crept towards the soon-to-be-dead mouse. Licking his chops with excitement, Rainpaw pounced and landed perfectly on top of it.

A hiss from the undergrowth startled him. His fur on end, Rainpaw circled around twice, still unclear of where the sound came from. He swiftly picked up the mouse and started trotting towards camp. He had to be hearing things, how could he not have picked up the scent?

More rustling in the bushes. Rainpaw was petrified and stood frozen with fear. Then, he put on a brave face and faced the bushes.

"Show yourself, intruder!" He snarled and unsheathed his claws, he had been trained for this.

But a cat didn't appear from the brush, instead, a small, long, scaley snake emerged. It slithered from the shelter of the bush's branches and leaves and stared long and hard at Rainpaw with its evil, beady eyes. Rainpaw let out a long yowl and started to run but he heard the snake behind him and halted.

He gulped and turned around. About a quarter of the snake - including its head - was poised in the air, ready to sink its large fangs into Rainpaw's innocent flesh. He realized that running was pointless, the snake could catch up to him at any moment. He had no training in dealing with snakes and never knew that he would have needed it.

The snake let out one more long hiss. Rainpaw began to back away slowly, making sure he had traction beneath his paws before he took another step. However, the snake just kept inching forward so no real distance was created between the two.

Rainpaw shivered, the only way to get out of this situation was to catch and kill the snake. Right now fear was radiating off of the young apprentice, and the snake could smell it. It was a slim chance that he would successfully land on and kill the snake, but it was a risk he had to take. So when he rose onto his hind legs slowly, the snake flinched ever so slightly. Rainpaw's sensitive belly was exposed, and he prayed to StarClan that he'd be okay.

Then he jumped higher than he's ever jumped before and prepared to land on the snake's head. But then his bones felt heavy as if a large weight was dragging them down. Yet, he wasn't moving, and neither was the snake.

Then a sharp pain like an arrow pierced through his chest. He felt his skin bend and eventually give in to the impact, and the razor sharp feeling scored straight through him. He choked and heard one voice.

The rain must fall.

Chapter One

A moon has passed since Ashpaw's vision and she hasn't given it much thought. She needed to focus everything on preparing for her assessment, where she'll be tested on all her skills. She could hunt and track really well, and while fighting may not be her ultimate strength; she was still decently good at it.

Their assessment was in a few days and the apprentices could train on their own time, but yesterday had been their last day to train with their mentors. Ashpaw felt like she was ready, but it didn't deter the fact how nervous she was. Her method to ease her nerves was to play with the kits.

A moon ago, Ambersong had an excruciatingly painful kitting. The queen couldn't walk, talk, or do much anything at all except lay there and silently allow her kits to feed. It was half a moon before she could even try to get around or talk. Now, she was better, but she looked tired and often limped when she had to get places.

Contradicting to their mother, the kits were strong and healthy, and Ashpaw had grown fond of Sharpkit. His black fur was just beginning to fluff out and his yellow eyes blazed with determination and curiosity. He was adorable! The sight of him made Ashpaw ache with a feeling hard to identify.

"Aren't they beautiful?"

Ashpaw jumped and looked up to see Mousefoot looking down at her. She shook her head, "Mousefoot you need to stop scaring me like that."

"Sorry," he rolled his eyes sarcastically. "I can't help being so quiet with these small paws."

Ashpaw purred, "Oh, the benefits of being small."

Dawnkit, a really pale-gray she-kit, hopped over to Ashpaw and

Mousefoot. She crouched down and launched herself at Ashpaw's face.

Spluttering, Ashpaw gently shook the kit off with a laugh, "Silly Dawnkit!"

Dawnkit stuck out her tongue and ran back to play with her brothers. Ashpaw watched with a sense of longing, wishing she had kits of her own.

Mousefoot intertwined his tail with hers, "I'm glad CloudClan seems to be settling in just fine."

Ashpaw perked up, that was right! CloudClan moved into their territory halfway through the last moon, and they seemed to be doing great.

Heron had been voted upon by the others to be the leader, where he then chose Blaze as his deputy. They were both given their warrior names by StarClan, Heronstar and Blazewing. River became medicine cat and decided to keep her name the same. Then there was Dinselpelt and Lynxtail plus Lilyfur who was close to kitting. Bramble also refused to have his name changed and moved in as an elder.

Featherwing was chosen by Stonestar to go with CloudClan and stay with them for a few moons. He had done this for a couple reasons; Most of CloudClan were yet to learn the warrior code and how to properly function as a Clan, plus he wanted a trusted warrior to help guide them along their path to succession.

"So, you're hanging out with the kits," Mousefoot observed, "Worried about your assessment again?"

"Of course!" Ashpaw lashed her tail passive-aggressively. "This assessment determines whether or not I'll be a warrior!"

Mousefoot laughed, "Ashpaw, never before have I heard of an apprentice that didn't pass their assessment."

Ashpaw flexed her paws by extending her claws into the earth, "But what if I'm the first apprentice to do so?"

"Stop worrying," Mousefoot rolled his eyes. "You are a great apprentice, Treefur talks about you all the time."

"He does?"

"Definitely," a smile erupted on the tom's face. "When all you apprentices are asleep, we talk about our apprentices."

"What do you talk about?"

"Well, for example, I told everyone a few nights ago, that Scorpionpaw's determination was very strong. A very self-assured apprentice who is a bit of a clumsy hunter, yet incredibly skilled at fighting like his father. Longwhisker said that Rainpaw was boosting his efforts and paying attention more than ever this moon. Bouncestep and Yellowgaze teamed up to talk about how well Frostpaw was doing. Treefur couldn't stop talking about you. He went on and on about your efforts, how skilled you were at both hunting and fighting."

Ashpaw shook her head with a grunt, "I'm not a fighter, I'm really not."

"Sure, override your mentor."

Ashpaw watched as Sharpkit and Tigerkit tumbled over each other in a game of Warrior. Both of their pelts were fluffed up to make themselves look bigger, and their eyes were full of curiosity and adventure. They would grow up to be fine warriors.

"Ashpaw, Treefur, Mousefoot, and Scorpionpaw!" Ashpaw turned her head to the voice; Bouncestep, "I would like you to come on a border patrol with me. We will also be checking in on CloudClan."

Ashpaw jumped up, "Could we hunt a little too?"

Bouncestep gazed over at the fresh kill pile, "It wouldn't hurt."

"Yes!" Ashpaw exclaimed under her breath, "I can practice my hunting."

The group assembled by the entrance and within seconds, they

left camp together.

While they were walking across the northern side of LightningClan territory towards GloomClan, Bouncestep called back his thoughts.

"GloomClan has been rather silent, it makes me nervous. They are unpredictable."

Ashpaw opened her jaws to object but Treefur intervened, "GloomClan is way too small at the moment to do any sort of trickery on other Clans."

"But they could use the belief we hold about them to do those sort of things."

"Just because they're GloomClan doesn't mean they're bad," Treefur whisked his tail.

"I'm just saying...be careful."

A couple more minutes passed by until they arrived at the border with GloomClan. Bouncestep turned around to face the patrol.

"Ashpaw and Scorpionpaw, you can mark."

Exhilarated to once more be trusted with the delicate job of marking, Ashpaw bounded over to the border and renewed the markers until she and Scorpionpaw met in the middle.

"Done and done!" Scorpionpaw gleamed.

"Right," Bouncestep headed south, "Let's go check in on CloudClan."

CloudClan was on the complete other side of LightningClan territory. It took some time, but they eventually got there.

Bouncestep sniffed the place where the markers should be, "Looks like they've been keeping up with their scents."

Treefur and Mousefoot both renewed the markers. Then the patrol

entered the territory to check in on CloudClan.

As they were walking into camp, Ashpaw heard a rustle in the brush somewhere. Tilting her ears, she looked around to find it's cause, but she never discovered it.

"Probably just some prey," Mousefoot assured her.

She nodded and hustled to rejoin the group. They walked for a few more minutes in peace when she heard another sound. Without thinking, she whisked around and brought her unsheathed claws through the air. However, she didn't hit anything. She grunted and started back to reunite with the patrol again.

Another rustle! She was getting ticked off now. But just as she looked up, she was only able to get a glimpse of a brown tabby glob falling towards her. She shrieked and tried to run, but the glob fell on top of her, causing her to buckle down under the weight and force of impact.

"Ashpaw!" Mousefoot raced over and tumbled into her attacker, "Who are you!?"

Ashpaw slowly got up, wiggling out all her limbs to make sure nothing was broken. She looked at her attacker and grunted, "That's Lynxtail!"

"Ashpaw!" He looked at her with genuine surprise in his gaze, "I thought you were a group of intruders..."

Ashpaw purred, "We'd never dream of attacking you guys."

Bouncestep muttered to himself, "How about you use your eyes next time."

Lynxtail sat up, "Sorry," he stuttered.

"Can you escort us to your camp?" Treefur asked.

"Yes! Sure thing," and then he bounced up to the front of the patrol and led us to CloudClan's camp.

When they entered the camp, Ashpaw gaped, forgetting how beautiful the camp was. The trees had very thick trunks with large holes carved inside them. And in each hole was a lining of moss for a cat to sleep. Only a few cats occupied the nests at that moment, but Ashpaw was sure the Clan would grow quickly.

Three kits raced across the clearing, stumbling over the paws of those were in front of the patrol. A black and cream tom kit tripped over Ashpaw and face planted in the grass. He looked up at her with apologetic eyes and then ran off to join his siblings.

Lynxtail purred, "That's my son, Spiderkit. Russetkit, the russet colored one, is my other son. And then Squirrelkit, the brown and white one, is my daughter."

"They're beautiful. How old are they?" Ashpaw pondered.

"Only a moon," he said as he watched them play.

"A moon? And they're already playing outside?" Ashpaw was surprised. Most kits weren't let out of the nursery until they were 3 moons.

"They are strong kits, don't you agree they look bigger and healthier than the average 1 moon old kit?"

"I guess you have a point," Ashpaw agreed. Perhaps this would be something unique to CloudClan, and she thought it'd be an interesting trait.

Featherwing bounded over from where she was talking with Heronstar, "It's so good to see you guys again!"

Ashpaw nuzzled her mother, "I can say the same to you."

Her mother eyed Mousefoot, "How are things with him?"

Ashpaw blushed, "Featherwing!"

She laughed, "I'm kidding. Why are you guys here?"

Bouncestep shrugged, "Just to see how things are doing."

Lynxtail jumped up, "Have I told you Dinselpelt is carrying Heronstar's kits?!"

"Really?" Scorpionpaw grinned.

"Yes! My own daughter!" Lynxtail was giddy with excitement, "I can't wait!"

They spent some more time there and then they headed back to camp. Ashpaw was satisfied with how the patrol went and calmly went to take a nap. She began to worry less and less about her assessment, and confidence rang over her like a bell.

Chapter Two

Ashpaw growled with might as her claws parried against Sootpaw's own. They had been striking against each other for the past half hour or so, and she had only been able to land a soft blow across his muzzle.

Her brother had grown inexplicably stronger, and larger at that. Muscles bulged in Sootpaw's limbs and his eyes were fierce with adolescence. He had obviously been training with someone. Whether it had been himself, or with the other apprentices, Ashpaw dared not ask. The last time she had, Sootpaw had snapped at her like a mother crow snaps at an invading male.

The other three apprentices were cheering both Ashpaw and Sootpaw on. The cheers had given Ashpaw a profound burst of determination, that was when she laid the soft blow upon Sootpaw. But now their cheers were dull and had the tinge of boredom on it. Ashpaw grunted as she tried to pounce on Sootpaw, yet he dodged out of the way as skillfully as a lean BreezeClan cat.

Before he was out of the way completely, Ashpaw snapped and beamed with triumph as she felt her teeth sink slightly into the flesh of his tail. Yelping, he whipped his tail out of her maw and pressed it against his flank. His light blue eyes were furious.

Rainpaw flicked his tail, "Next round, Scorpionpaw and Frostpaw."

The young cream tabby tom and white she-cat pranced into the clearing, eager to parry. Scorpionpaw was first to launch, no hesitation. Frostpaw hadn't the time to prepare herself and was flattened on the ground by her brother. Scorpionpaw batted her face with sheathed claws and started to churn her soft belly with his powerful hind legs. But before he could get much on her, Frostpaw

flipped over and ran her paw across Scorpionpaw's eyes. Play-hissing, he leaped backward and leaned his chest toward the grass so his rear was in the air.

Frostpaw flattened her black ears against her head, "You're honestly pathetic."

Scorpionpaw, offended, growled and launched himself at Frostpaw. She - who had been expecting it - slid out of the way and pounced on his back. With another growl, the tom flipped on his back and kicked out his hind legs, sending his sister a few tail-lengths away.

Both of them stood up, their ragged and ruffled fur bristling slightly in the wind. Rainpaw - who was put in charge of the arrangements- flicked his tail once more, "Off."

The two took their place in their original seats and the group of apprentices waited for Rainpaw to call the next group.

His voice brisk and smug, he announced, "Sootpaw and I."

Sootpaw, clearly satisfied with his opponent, walked into the middle of the meadow. He stood up straight so his muscular build was in full view. His fur had been licked down flat against his body since his parry with Ashpaw. He let his chin fall slightly, so small bits of his teeth were glinting in the sunlight.

Rainpaw simply walked over. His fur smooth and glossy, was untouched by the wind. He stood up, but not straight, ready to move whenever he had to.

"And, fight!" Scorpionpaw called out.

Sootpaw rushed towards Rainpaw, his paws only beating the ground twice before he jumped. As quick as a frightened adder, Rainpaw moved out of the way and jumped on Sootpaw's back. Rainpaw churned his paws against Sootpaw for only a few moments before he hopped off a few tail-lengths away, waiting for Sootpaw's next move.

Sootpaw was panting slightly in his stance. His eyes were

narrowed in frustration. He leaped to the side and began to attack from the side. As Rainpaw started to retaliate, Sootpaw jumped in front of him and batted him into the dirt with a cold stare. Rainpaw huffed and stood up, shook out his fur, and glared at Sootpaw.

"Training is over. Let's hope we all do well in our assessment tomorrow," Rainpaw nodded and started walking back to camp.

Scorpionpaw padded in front of Ashpaw and next to Sootpaw, "Those were some pretty cold moves, cat."

Sootpaw rolled his eyes, "I can't tell if that's an insult or not."

"Just saying you were a little rough. You played with Rainpaw like he was a dead rat in the dust."

"Treated him just as I did Ashpaw, does that concern you?"

Scorpionpaw shrugged, "Well, it is just a training session. You kicked Ashpaw's and Rainpaw's butts like you were in a battle."

"Isn't it called battle training for a reason?" Sootpaw glared at the tom.

Scorpionpaw gulped and nodded, "Yes, yes. Yes, it is!" The tom ran ahead.

Ashpaw sighed, "Sootpaw, maybe you should go take a swim in the river. You're as tense as a mother crow unable to find food for her chicks."

"Do I look like a RainClan cat?" Sootpaw scoffed impertinently, "If I were a crow, I wouldn't waste my time with some chicks."

Growling under her breath, Ashpaw tailed the group. She didn't understand Sootpaw's odd behavior. Every time she tried to strike a conversation, he'd blow it down like he's stomping on a fly. It's almost as if he hates communicating. The most communication he does is talking to Ambersong (for whatever reason) and watching her kits with disgust in his eyes.

She couldn't wait for the Gathering. Finally, a time of peace in

this chaotic world.

"Silence!" Snapped Emberstar, her tail flicking irritably at the chatter. "Let us begin."

"GloomClan is faring well in the beginning times of newleaf. However, we have lost a faithful warrior a few days ago," Emberstar gazed at her Clan. "Tigerdusk, our only elder, passed away in his sleep to join his family once more in StarClan. He was with us for a long time, and it was only reasonable that he was reunited with the ones he loved once more."

"Tigerdusk! Tigerdusk!" The Clans cheered in spite of his life and to honor his service and time he spent on this world.

Whitestar twitched his whiskers as he stood up. His green eyes blazing with the furiosity of what it means to be a leader.

"Splashstream has successfully given birth to her last litter of kits. Both she and all three of her kits, Songkit, Jaykit, and Sandkit, are perfectly healthy. She will be retiring after she finishes nursing them. Cloudkit, the only survivor of Slatefur's litter, is doing well. We expect her to become an apprentice in two moons," Whitestar sighed. "Duskwaters is not in a good condition. We believe that he has succumbed to a late fever of greencough, and will not live much longer. It has surprised all of us that he's made it this far. Rowanpaw is learning as quick as he can so he can take over when he must, yet he fears for his mentor."

Murmurs of sadness rippled through the air. Ashpaw muttered her own prayer that Duskwaters would die peacefully and not in a rack of pain.

Pebblestar flicked her tail, "We have three new warriors and apprentices! Lionfur, Leopardstep, and Tigerstrike become warriors a little over three quarter-moons ago. They are also the new mentors of Dustpaw, Lilypaw, and Smokepaw."

"Lionfur! Leopardstep! Tigerstrike! Dustpaw! Lilypaw! Smokepaw!" The names were chanted twice. Ashpaw felt her own voice ring in unison with the others.

Stonestar swallowed, his stern gaze overlooking the cats, "My deputy has endured the most pain. She had a very difficult birth at the beginning of the moon, yet she is healthy now and making it through. Her kits are also expected to live. Sharpkit, Tigerkit, and Dawnkit are all healthy. Our apprentices are having their assessment tomorrow, and I am sure they will do well."

The other leaders began to hop down when another small group of cats came into the clearing of Four Stars. Leading them was a white and gray tom, his eyes were a mix of determination and clumsiness.

"Please don't end it yet!" The tom ran up with a smile. "Your Gatherings will be a little longer from now on!"

LightningClan knew what was going on, but the other Clans did not. This was CloudClan's first Gathering. And Heronstar had forgotten all about it.

"I am Heronstar, leader of CloudClan!" He flicked his tail to the cats behind him. "This is Blazewing, River, Dinselpelt, Lynxtail, Lilyfur, Bramble, and our teacher, Featherwing of LightningClan. I apologize we were so late, I am not accustomed to this timing."

Pebblestar purred, "Welcome, Heronstar. We are more than happy to have you a place on this rock."

Heronstar stared at the she-cat for a moment. He caught himself and shook his head, "Most cert-" He stopped as the ground below him began to shake.

All the cats were on alert and panicking as the ground moved. But Ashpaw identified the cause. She stood up slightly on her hind legs and looked at CloudClan's tree, "Look!"

The leaves on the tree sprouted swiftly and beautifully. Thousands of different shades of green bathed the tree in the moonlight. Its bark was new and fresh, compared to the old bark of the other Clans' trees. But one branch stuck out, and on that branch were two cats, both outlined in stars.

"I am Fernstar," one of them spoke, "This is Shadewhisker. We were the leader and deputy of CloudClan before we were destroyed by Haunting and his devastating followers. In StarClan, we were certain that CloudClan was gone forever, but you young cats have brought us back together. It will take some time to mend what the clock has struck on us, but it will be done. Heronstar is a good cat, he will lead you well."

And with that, the cats vanished.

Chapter Three

Ashpaw bolted up the tree and leaped onto the thin branch, not wasting time to close her jaws around the squirrel. She dropped the squirrel on the ground below her and sniffed the air for any other inhabitants of the tree. To her dismay, there was not, therefore she had to find more prey possibly on the ground or other trees. She carefully glided down the trunk, her claws hooking in and out of the bark. She landed on the fresh, spring grass with a small thud. She parted her jaws and tasted the air.

She caught a whiff of mouse and she pursued the scent until it grew noticeably stronger. She dropped into a hunting crouch, inching her way over the ground and being careful as to not to drag her paws. The mouse was scurrying around a root, frantically trying to find a few nuts. Perhaps it was a meal for her little ones. Too bad she'd be a meal herself. Ashpaw had to time her pounce so she could land perfectly on the frantic animal. She wiggled her haunches and then propelled herself forward, hitting the mouse square on the skull consequently killing it.

Grabbing the mouse, Ashpaw walked over to her squirrel where she struggled to pick that up as well. Her assessment wasn't over and she wasn't sure where to put the prey. She decided to put it by a beech tree root. As she was putting it down, her ear automatically turned to a noise carried by the wind. Before she could retaliate, a large weight pressed upon her.

She was pressed onto her back, face to face with her opponent. The black tom twitched his whiskers in amusement as if to confirm that this was part of the assessment. Ashpaw huffed and began to struggle as he pinned her down effortlessly. Eventually, she let herself go limp. The act had stunned Bouncestep and he backed off, wondering if he had hurt her somehow. Taking the element of surprise, Ashpaw turned onto her belly and pranced her way onto

Bouncestep, knocking him down and then churning her paws against his soft belly fur. Bouncestep hissed and kicked her off. She was surprised to find herself so far away from the tom, but she could use this to her advantage. Quietly, she darted into a bush. Now still as ever, she watched Bouncestep walk over to the bush with a bored look on his face. Smirking, she zoomed out the other side of the bush, pulled herself up a tree, and jumped on Bouncestep with no hesitation. The whole process had only taken a few seconds, about the same amount of time it took the average warrior to realize what was going on. The tom buckled under the force of her impact and flicked his tail in surrender. As she hopped off, the deputy bolted away as a scared and injured warrior would do in a true battle.

Treefur emerged from the underbrush with a grin in his eyes, "Well done, Ashpaw! You have done great. I will discuss with Stonestar, and you will find out the news tomorrow. You were the last to have your assessment, so you can go talk with your friends."

Ashpaw bounced up and down eagerly as she tailed him back to camp. Was she going to get her warrior name? She couldn't wait! But had she earned it? She had done her best... Halting in her tracks, she remembered her prey and went back to receive it. Purring, she went back to camp, exhilarated to talk to the other apprentices.

"Do you guys think you earned your warrior names?" Ashpaw asked after she finished chewing a bite of her squirrel, with which she had been given permission to eat.

Frostpaw licked a paw and brought it over her head, "I think I did, but I messed up when I tried to catch a sparrow. I'm not sure."

"Even the greatest warriors mess up," Rainpaw purred.

The white and black she-cat blushed but didn't say anything.

"Of course I did well enough," Sootpaw scoffed, "Every paw step of the way was as easy as a walk through the woods."

"Everything's easy for you," Scorpionpaw growled under his

breath, the remark inaudible to Sootpaw.

Ashpaw rolled on her back, "I hate that we have to wait until tomorrow!"

"At least it's in the morning," Rainpaw peered over the tree stump they had been eating on.

"Longwhisker, Ashpaw, and Rainpaw," Bouncestep called out, "Come with me on the border patrol."

Happy to get her mind off of her assessment results, Ashpaw joined the other three cats at the entrance.

"Right," Bouncestep counted them to make sure they were all here. "Let's go."

The patrol reached the GloomClan border after a while of walking. Ashpaw sniffed the scent line and perked her head up, eyes wide.

"Their border is slanted, Bouncestep. Slanted inward," she reported.

"Odd," Bouncestep sniffed the border to confirm the report. "As far as I know, they don't really have any younger warriors or apprentices to mess up marking."

Rainpaw got closer to inspect the scent markers as well. He narrowed his eyes for a moment, then rose, "It's not a straight line either. Whoever marked it... something was either wrong, or they were inexperienced somehow."

Bouncestep sat down, "Let's wait for a patrol."

It was only a few moments before Ashpaw gagged internally on the even stronger scent of GloomClan cats. She recognized the trio as Adderblaze, the deputy, and Smokestreak and Shadowpelt.

Smokestreak bared his teeth in a small growl, "What do you cats want?"

Bouncestep calmly stood up and beckoned to the border with his paw, "Something is amiss with your markers."

Shadowpelt twitched his crooked whiskers, "Impossible! How could we have messed up?"

"See for yourself," Longwhisker snarled.

Adderblaze sniffed the marker with hollow eyes. He brought his head back up with a slightly parted jaw, "This is them! It's them!"

"Who?" Shadowpelt queried.

"My kits! This is their scent!" He eagerly inhaled the border's scent again.

"Pardon me?" Bouncestep huffed. "Your kits were out here?"

"They went missing last night!" Adderblaze wailed. "We've sent out search patrols everywhere but we couldn't find them."

"Fix your border," Longwhisker curled his lip.

Smokestreak narrowed his eyes, "Keep your fur on."

"Watch your mouth!" He snapped.

Shadowpelt pushed Smokestreak away, "Haha, funny conversation! Sorry to end it here."

"Wha-" Smokestreak began.

"My kits!!!" Adderblaze eagerly trailed their scent, not waiting for the patrol.

"Wait up!" Smokestreak ran after him, Shadowpelt on his tail.

"We'll keep an eye out!" Rainpaw called after them.

"Weirdos," Longwhisker sniffed. "Never understood GloomClan."

"How are they weird? He's doing what every father would do when his kits go missing. He looks for them and worries," Ashpaw

countered.

Longwhisker didn't respond for a while. Instead, he dragged Ashpaw to the very back of the patrol and cleared his throat.

"Ashpaw, I know we aren't that close anymore. But can I trust you with a secret?"

"Sure," she shrugged. "Safe with me."

"I'm a father," he gleamed.

Ashpaw widened her eyes, "With who?"

He looked down at the ground, "Nightwing."

"Night-" Ashpaw began to say it out loud, but went back to a whispering state, "Nightwing!?"

"We love each other!" Longwhisker purred, "She gave birth a little less than six moons ago. She wants me to bring them in to become warriors of LightningClan. To be the cats she wished she could've been."

"That's great! How many?"

Longwhisker gulped, "Five."

Ashpaw let out a small yelp, "Five?!"

He nodded, "Fernkit, Beechkit, Ratkit, Bluekit, and Aspenkit."

"Wow," Ashpaw gulped.

"What do you think I should do?"

Ashpaw thought for a moment, "You should bring them in tomorrow in the morning at the time our warrior names will be announced. So he can announce new apprentices as well."

"What do I tell them of their mother? Most of them resemble me for sure, so it is quite inevitable I am their father."

"You fell in love with a she-cat and you accidentally-" Ashpaw shook her head, "I'm not sure."

"I accidentally?..."

Ashpaw coughed, "Um, you know."

Longwhisker wasn't getting it. Ashpaw thought he knew for sure. Perhaps he was just being the blind bat he often was.

"The woodpecker put his beak in the tree?" Ashpaw tried to word it carefully.

Longwhisker's eyes bolted wide open, "As disturbing as that is, perhaps. I mean it *is* that time of the year for most she-cats."

Ashpaw shuddered, "But you had them six moons ago supposedly."

"Agh!" Longwhisker growled to himself, "I'll just tell them I fell in love with a kittypet for a brief amount of time."

"Should work," Ashpaw shrugged.

A/N

cough cough what am I doing what did I just write I'm freaking out waht waht waht

Chapter Four

The rising sun allowed the morning rays to unfold upon the waking Clan. The fresh morning dew dropped off of leaves from the trees, moistening the ground and therefore allowing a more comfortable surface for many cats' cracked paws. Ashpaw breathed in the fresh air of a new day. She inhaled until she could hold the air no longer, and let it out with a relaxing sigh. These were her last moments as an apprentice. Hopefully.

"Aren't you excited!?" Scorpionpaw and Frostpaw were bounding around the clearing. Adrenaline was coursing through their veins as they embraced the last of the apprentice stage. Where they would be in the warrior's stage for a long while, and hopefully become an elder.

Sootpaw and Rainpaw emerged from the apprentice's den. They were calm, but their eyes raced with wonder and eagerness. Ashpaw could hardly contain her own emotions.

Mousefoot slinked out of the warrior's den and shook out his messed up fur. He sat down and began to flatten down his long fur with a spiked tongue. Ashpaw bounced over to him, hoping to discuss her future as a warrior.

"Do you think I passed?" Ashpaw blinked at him.

He stopped grooming and gave her a reassuring glance, "I *know* you did."

Ashpaw blushed, "What do you think my warrior name will be?"

Sootpaw said as he walked by, "I'll be surprised if you get one."

Mousefoot flattened his ears, "Ignore that brat. He's lucky his skills compensate for his attitude."

Ashpaw shrugged, unbothered by Sootpaw's remark.

Stonestar emerged from his den and skillfully jumped up onto the Great Boulder. He only had to touch a ledge of the boulder once before he reached the top. His gaze was content and happy like he had accomplished a goal he was waiting to achieve for a long time.

"Cats of LightningClan! Gather beneath the Great Boulder for a long awaited Clan meeting!" His deep voice rang through the camp so that no cat, not even Frostpaw (who has a weak sense of hearing), couldn't hear.

Gradually, cats gathered together with their friends and their family. Ambersong limped out of the nursery, her kits bouncing around her as they watched eagerly from the entrance. Naturally, all five apprentices grouped together near the bottom of the boulder, awaiting their warrior name.

"May all five apprentices come up on this sacred boulder," Stonestar gazed down at them.

One by one, they jumped up. First the gray trio, Sootpaw, then Rainpaw and Ashpaw. Scorpionpaw jumped up with ease, and Frostpaw was on his tail. In moments, they were next to Stonestar, their hearts pounding as they waited to hear the results of their assessment.

"Frostpaw and Scorpionpaw," Stonestar gazed at them with his warm, green gaze, "Step forward."

As they stepped forward to distinguish themselves from the rest of the apprentices, Stonestar let his voice be heard throughout the camp and most of LightningClan territory:

"I, Stonestar, leader of LightningClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn," Stonestar turned toward them. "Frostpaw and Scorpionpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Frostpaw nodded, her chin brushing her chest, "I do."

Scorpionpaw shifted as a way to contain his excitement, "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names. Frostpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Frostleaf. StarClan honors your patience and kindness, and we welcome you as a full warrior of LightningClan."

Frostleaf gasped with the amazing sensation of being relieved from being an apprentice. For no longer was she bound under the rules of a mentor, but she could walk freely through the territory and maybe even teach an apprentice of her own. She was a new cat, a new warrior, and she embraced it with tender love. Stonestar rested his muzzle on the top of her head between her ears, in turn, she licked his shoulder, and her ceremony was finished. The newly-made she-warrior bounded down from the boulder and sat comfortably at the base, relishing her new name that she would carry until death.

Stonestar shifted so he was facing Scorpionpaw, "Scorpionpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Scorpionfang. StarClan credits you for your courage and skill in battle. We welcome you as a full warrior of LightningClan."

Ashpaw knew that Scorpionfang liked his new name. It was a representation of his ferocity and his skill and courage. Scorpions were known for being tough and deadly creatures, and Scorpionfang enjoyed that he was a perfect image of such. As he had with Frostleaf, Stonestar touched his muzzle to Scorpionfang's head, and then Scorpionfang licked his leader's shoulder in firm respect. Then he too jumped off the large rock to join his sister at the base.

"Sootpaw, Rainpaw, and Ashpaw, come forward."

Stonestar repeated the first part of the ritual in commending a warrior to StarClan. Then he asked the senior apprentices, "Do you all promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Sootpaw sat up straight.

"I do," Rainpaw answered with a brief nod.

Ashpaw purred, "I do."

"By the approval of StarClan, I give you your warrior names. Sootpaw, from this time and forever more, you will be known as Sootpelt. StarClan honors your fighting skill and forethought."

Sootpelt exhaled in relief and jumped down, not allowing Stonestar to complete the ritual with the rest of his muzzle and the shoulder lick. However, it was acceptable to skip it.

"Rainpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Rainfall. StarClan honors your ability to take initiative and the warmth of your personality."

Rainfall allowed Stonestar to rest his head on his, and licked his shoulder. With a nod of respect, Rainfall landed at the base of the rock with the other warriors.

Stonestar twitched his whiskers, "The last apprentice. Ashpaw, from now on, you will be known as Ashfrost, not only to resemble your friendship with Frostleaf, but to remind you of your ability to *cool the fire.* StarClan honors your spirit and your thoughtfulness."

Stonestar, for the last time, rested his muzzle upon the flat of her skull and allowed her to lick his shoulder.

Then he turned to face the Clan and yowled a hearty and happy caterwaul, "Let these cats be known as full warriors of LightningClan!"

The Clan erupted into loud cheers, "Frostleaf! Scorpionfang! Sootpelt! Rainfall! Ashfrost! Frostleaf! Scorpionfang! Sootpelt! Rainfall! Ashfrost!"

Ashfrost felt better than ever to be relieved of the burden that her apprentice name had laid down on her. She had made the journey and contributed to the revival of CloudClan and dealt with many struggles in her belief of StarClan. While the cats were cheering, Ashfrost could detect one voice that rang louder than the others, and the voice was none other than Mousefoot. A warm glow rang

through her body from tail tip to nose. Her ears grew warm and she purred. She purred louder than she ever has before. She was a *warrior*. Not a full-grown warrior, not quite yet, but a warrior nonetheless. And she was proud.

Chapter Five

The aftermath of the warriors' ceremony was probably Ashfrost's favorite part. Other warriors congratulated them on their feat and gave them blessings for the years to come. Ashfrost felt truly praised to be looked at with such happiness. For a long while, she felt like she couldn't do anything right, but here she was as a young warrior.

The only sad part about the aftermath was that neither of her parents were here to congratulate her. Featherwing was busy in CloudClan, and only StarClan knows who her biological father is. Pikeleap had been her fake father but died soon after she was born, so it was pointless to her.

Since Ashfrost was sitting near the entrance, contemplating her thoughts, she heard a rustle in the spiky bushes.

"Ashfrost?" The hoarse whisper was Longwhisker's.

Ashfrost looked around to make sure no one was watching, then she walked through the entrance to find Longwhisker right there. Five unfamiliar scents touched her senses and she realized his kits must be hiding somewhere.

"Do I just... go in?" He asked warily.

"It'll be a little embarrassing," Ashfrost admitted. "But if you want them to join the Clan, all six of you have to be able to bare the hot gaze of everyone in camp. It should be worth it because I'm confident that Stonestar will let them in."

"Can you do it with me?"

"I'd love to aid you, Longwhisker, however, this is your job alone to bring them in. Plus, since I'm assuming most of them are gray because both parents are, it would be rather convincing that I'm their mother. It would be a misunderstanding hard to get others to comprehend. Almost everyone knows that Mousefoot and I have a thing."

"I see," Longwhisker looked down at his paws, then back to her. "Can you at least stand outside the entrance and reassure me? I feel like a kit on its first day out of the nursery."

"That I can do," Ashfrost purred.

Ashfrost was sitting back in front of the entrance. She was staring at the ground, trying her best to count the blades of grass without losing track. Several times she had messed up already, but she needed to seem like she was lost in her thoughts so no one would come ask her about being alone by the entrance. She looked at the cats in camp, most were sharing tongues, and it has only been about half an hour since Ashfrost was given her new name. She flicked her tail noisily, it was time.

Longwhisker tread through the entrance, his fur slightly snagging on the spiked leaves of the bushes. As he walked through, five kits hopped behind him. The one closest to his father was the largest. He was light gray and had darker gray ears, paws, and tail tip. His green eyes blazed with determination and curiosity. Another tom was behind him, he was also light gray but had a cream underbelly and muzzle. It was quite an interesting color combination. This one, like his brother, also had green eyes. Yet another tom followed behind the second, he was black and had amber eyes. Finally, two she-kits were at the tail of the line. The first one was a light gray tabby and had blue eyes. The one behind her was black and had a gray underbelly, muzzle, paws, and the whole of her tail. Her green eyes were sharp with interest and seriousness. She highly resembled her mother, Nightwing.

Stonestar had been lying on the Great Boulder, head on paws. But his head rose and his ears flattened as he saw the group of six walk into camp.

"What is the meaning of this, Longwhisker?" His stern gaze would've burned Longwhisker's pelt right off, should he have had the ability to do so.

Longwhisker beckoned his kits around him, doing his best to ignore that their presence had silenced the sharing of tongues and brought all gazes on him. Ashfrost could tell that he was hot from embarrassment, for the emotion was wafting off of him in strong waves.

"Stonestar," the gray, tabby warrior looked up at the leader of LightningClan with renewed determination. "All the Clans are of small stature. While we may currently be the largest, we are still small compared to what we once were. Yang has told the story many times how our Clan had reached close to twenty under the reign of Hawkstar. I have brought these kits...*my* kits, to help our Clan grow larger and stronger."

Stonestar narrowed his eyes, "And who is the mother of these...kits?"

Longwhisker hesitated and shifted his posture, "A...a loner, Stonestar. A loner is the mother of these kits."

Longwhisker had twisted from kittypet to loner. It did sound a little better, but it was not entirely the truth. And even with this contorted truth, he still broke the warrior code. A punishment was inevitable. How big or small it was? Ashfrost couldn't tell. But his statement had caused an uprise of muttering from the warriors.

"Traitor!" Sootpelt snarled. "Could you not find a mate within your own Clan?"

If cats had eyebrows, Stonestar just raised one, "Sootpelt has a point. If you can not find a mate in your own Clan, it is most likely your fate to not be a father. As disappointing as it seems, things aren't always meant to be. But you denied your fate, Longwhisker, and you went out of your way not only to avoid fate but to break the warrior code."

Longwhisker flattened his lengthy whiskers against his muzzle,

"Stonestar, she wanted me to bring these kits to the Clans to be the warriors she never could be. I wasn't mates with just a loner, I am mates with a rogue. I fell in love with her when she was a member of this Clan."

"Nightwing," Stonestar looked off into the distance, anger burned in his eyes like a fire. "I knew she was nothing but trouble. She breaks the warrior code and then brings some of my own loyal warriors into her catastrophes!"

"Stonestar, please, she has a good side. Ta-"

"Silence!" Stonestar snapped. "You are in no place to talk out of turn!"

Ashfrost had to speak up, "These kits have nowhere to go, Stonestar."

Longwhisker nodded frantically.

"They can go back to the piece of crow-food their mother is!" Stonestar growled. "I will not take these half-paws into my Clan. They won't know where their loyalties lie."

"And they'll learn that this is their home if you give them the chance!" Ashfrost protested.

"Ashfrost, this is not your fight," Stonestar curled his lip. "Stay out of it."

Mousefoot took a breath, then spoke, "They are *kits*, Stonestar. Their mother didn't want them by the sound of it. Therefore they have nowhere to go. Longwhisker had a point, our Clan will be better with them."

Stonestar remained silent for a long time. Everyone looked up at him, their hearts pounding as they waited for his answer. After a while, he narrowed his eyes into slits, "I will take *some* of them."

Longwhisker wailed, "You can't break them up!"

"It is your punishment for breaking the code!"

Ashfrost widened her eyes. To only take some of Longwhisker's five kits was an unruly consequence of its own. The kits had done nothing wrong, yet they were being punished for a mistake their father made. No, not a mistake, those kits were not a mistake. They had to stay together! Where would the other kits go, if Stonestar only takes some?

"I will take a female and two males. The other two can go train in CloudClan, they need more kits to train," Stonestar sat up, his eyes ablaze with anger.

Longwhisker was infuriated now, he let a snarl rumble in his throat, "I will not let you ruin these kits' lives for something that I messed up on! I tell you, I fell in love with Nightwing when she was a warrior of LightningClan. She had told me she was carrying my kits the day before you exiled her! You exiled a queen!"

Stonestar was startled by the statement. It was no doubt that Longwhisker was telling the truth. Had he made a mistake in exiling Nightwing? But how could he bring her back if he wanted to? She had lashed out against a warrior - no - warriors of her own Clan. Had he been too harsh? Perhaps when he asked for the opinions of others, they were too frightened to speak out.

Stonestar couldn't let go of his pride, instead of accepting his possible incident immediately, he tried to avoid it. "I should've been notified."

"She didn't have time to tell you," Longwhisker looked at the ground with narrowed eyes. "You exiled her without allowing her an option to speak."

Snowberry nodded, "You should've let her say something."

Ashfrost kept her mouth shut, she was afraid of what might happen if she intervened.

Treefur couldn't let the argument go by without his input. This was his sister! "She needed more time to adjust. It was hard even for me to become accustomed to the more gentle way of Clan life."

Stonestar growled, "Silence! How dare you question my decision as a leader! Leader's word is *law* and you should not question it!"

"The warrior code says to obey a leader's word, that doesn't mean we can't question it," Longwhisker brought a straying kit closer to him.

"Well, if leader's word is law, then don't question me. Question me further and you risk punishment!" Stonestar gray fur was standing up in fury. His tail was bushed out and flicking side to side rapidly against the stone ground.

Most of the new warriors felt like they were in no place to talk. But Ashfrost noticed Scorpionfang fidgeting at the end of the crowd, his claws were kneading the grass. Finally, his fidgeting stopped and he stood up with a jolt.

"I think you just have too large of an ego to admit you made a mistake in exiling Nightwing!" Scorpionfang snapped.

Silence. No one spoke, instead, they all stared at the bristling young warrior. Stonestar's eyes were wide with anger and surprise. He was surprised at the bravery the young warrior had to speak up against him. Yet he was angered that Scorpionfang had dared to state that. Ashfrost saw it in her leader's eyes, despite being exposed, he still wouldn't admit to the deed. He knew it was an accident that he exiled Nightwing, that he had rid the Clan of a strong warrior. But his pride was too large for him to admit it openly. His fur flattened against his body and he closed his eyes.

"Perhaps I'm not fit to be a leader," Stonestar laid down on the rock and closed his eyes. He had murmured the statement to himself so inaudibly that Ashfrost had to strain to hear it, yet she did.

Ashfrost was mad that Stonestar dared to question himself like that. He was one of LightningClan's strongest leaders that they have had in a long time. Every leader has made a mistake.

Stonestar opened his eyes and stared at Longwhisker. He let out a long, low growl, "Find Nightwing and bring her here tonight!" He

snapped and jumped down from the Great Boulder.

He began to go into his den when he stopped and looked over his shoulder, "All five kits can stay. They will be given mentors tonight." Then he stalked into the darkness.

Ashfrost exhaled, not realizing she had been holding her breath constantly. What an ordeal...

Longwhisker was cheering with his kits and telling them that they could stay. Ashfrost doubted they had understood any or most of the argument, all they needed to know was that they would be apprentices.

Ashfrost looked back the den that Stonestar walked into. She couldn't help but notice his skill in leadership faltering slightly these past few days, almost like he was pretending something that *was* there, *wasn't* really there. It concerned her, and she made a quick prayer to StarClan before she went to go take a small nap in the warrior's den.

Chapter Six

Bouncestep and Longwhisker had been elected to go fetch Nightwing from where she stayed. Longwhisker admitted that he visited her and the kits frequently, and knew her home by heart. It was only a matter of time before Ashfrost saw them walk through the entrance, a black and gray she-cat being flanked by them. Bouncestep was harsh on the rogue and hardly gave her room to breathe, contrasting to Longwhisker. Whom was giving her plenty of room. They walked into the middle of the camp where they both sat behind the rogue. Stonestar came out of the leader's den, his eyes narrowed into slits in concentration.

"Nightwing," he sat down in front of her as he spoke her name in greeting.

"Stonestar," she held his gaze for a long time, determined to not be undermined by the leader of LightningClan.

Stonestar looked to his left as he began to speak, "You were exiled for injuring several Clanmates, am I not correct?"

She dipped her head calmly, "That is entirely true, Stonestar."

He looked back at her and scanned her from ear-tip to paw-tip, "And your mate has brought in your. . . five kits, to become apprentices and then warriors in their turn. Longwhisker *is* your mate, right?"

"Yes," Nightwing dipped her head again. "Longwhisker is my mate, and it was my wish for him to bring my kits here."

"Elaborate your decision?"

"When you had exiled me, my only worry was my kits. They would have no father to protect them if I had to go and hunt. They would be entirely vulnerable to many other predators, had I left them for a second. I knew I did not belong here, but I was hoping

that you would take them in kindly."

"And how did you cope with this problem for these six moons?"

"Longwhisker would visit us at midnight almost every night, and he would stay and play with the kits while I would go hunt and catch a few pieces of prey for the next day or two," she admitted without reluctance.

Stonestar gazed at the gray tabby tom, "Is this true, Longwhisker?"

The warrior exhaled, "Yes, Stonestar. I abandoned my Clan late almost every night to ensure the safety of my family."

Ashfrost thought she heard a purr rumble in Stonestar's throat, but once the sound passed, she wasn't exactly sure what she heard.

"Longwhisker, I admire your determination to protect your family, as you full well knew the possible punishment. Most cats wouldn't have dared to do what you did," Stonestar's gaze turned warm with affection. Not the affection mates have for each other, but the warm affection a leader has for his Clan.

Longwhisker seemed startled by the praise, he nodded, "Thank you, Stonestar."

"I will take in *all* the kits and I will give them their apprentice names. However, they will belong in LightningClan forever, and Nightwing, you can not take them back. Longwhisker, you will not go unscathed for this."

Longwhisker nodded in agreement, he knew he wouldn't be going unpunished.

Nightwing twitched an ear, "Stonestar, I would like to ask something of you."

"Go on?" Suspicion was raising inside of the leader, Ashfrost could smell it.

"It sounds ridiculous, but I would like to become part of

LightningClan again."

Stonestar's nostrils flared, "Wha-!"

Nightwing dared to interrupt him, "I am fully aware of what I did, and perhaps I do not deserve to be a warrior as I wish to be. Put me on full-time apprentice duty, I won't spare one of your warriors to be my mentor, but I will volunteer to do every task that needs to be done. No apprentices available, and ticks need to be done? I'll be there without hesitation," she stared at the ground as she flexed her claws in and out of the damp dirt. "I'll do whatever it takes to see my kits grow up."

Most of the warriors in camp seemed swayed by her small speech. A mother's love was most stronger than any other relationship known to any cat. She would die to protect her kits in a heartbeat, and like any mother, Nightwing wanted to see them become *good* warriors.

Stonestar thought for a moment, "Very well. I will make you an apprentice, and you must fulfill any duties that an apprentice cannot do. Complaining or hesitation will not be tolerated, you understand?"

Nightwing's eyes lit up with joy, "Yes, Stonestar! Thank you so much!"

Stonestar eyed Longwhisker, "Have the kits come over to me."

Longwhisker bent over and whispered to the kits, then they all bounced over to the muscular leader in sheer excitement.

Stonestar purred, "Tell me your names."

A gray fluffy tom with darker ears, paws, and tail tip spoke first, "I'm Fernkit!"

"I'm Beechkit!" A gray tabby tom-kit with a cream underbelly and muzzle announced.

A large, long-furred, dark cream tom-kit narrowed his amber eyes and grinned as he slid his claws in and out of the ground, "I'm

Ratkit!"

A light gray tabby she-kit blinked, "I'm Bluekit."

Then the last one, a black she-kit, said her name, "Aspenkit."

Stonestar rumbled, "Cats of LightningClan! We have five new additions tonight!"

Some cats cheered, but others were muttering their disagreements at letting the kits in. Especially since Stonestar had been so reluctant earlier.

"From this day forward, these kits will be known as Fernpaw, Beechpaw, Ratpaw, Bluepaw, and Aspenpaw. Fernpaw, your mentor will be Rainfall, and he will teach all he knows to you, as are the ways of a mentor. Beechpaw, your mentor will be Snowberry. She is a very experienced warrior, and you will learn lots from her. Ratpaw, your mentor will be Scorpionfang. You both have lots of energy and a constant will to fight, so it seems. Bluepaw, your mentor will be Frostleaf. And Aspenpaw, your mentor is Sootpelt."

The apprentices bounced around giddily and touched noses with their new mentors. Ashfrost purred, they would be great additions to the Clan. Their attitudes would always keep the spirits up. Ashfrost was slightly dismayed that she had not chosen to be a mentor, but she felt it was for a reason. Stonestar seemed to sense that she wanted to have other priorities first.

Mousefoot rubbed up against her, "You're finally a warrior."

She purred, "I know. It oddly feels so much different."

"Come," Mousefoot left for the entrance. "I want to hang out at the lake."

Ashfrost rumbled affectionately and followed Mousefoot through the entrance.

Chapter Seven

It's been a moon since Ashfrost's warrior ceremony and the ordeal with Nightwing and her kits. The newly made apprentices were fitting in much better than most cats expected. Rainfall wouldn't stop bragging about Fernpaw. He often apologized for his bragging, but Fernpaw was truly a good apprentice. The tom had caught a thrush on his first day hunting and nearly caught a blackbird the other day. All the other apprentices were doing just as well or slightly lesser.

Ashfrost got up and stretched. An unfamiliar uncomfortable tugging came from her belly. She stretched again and it went away. She yawned, it was probably just a small cramp from sleeping in an awkward position.

As she walked out of the den, the warm, morning sunlight helped her wake up from her slumber. Her ears twitched in the direction of the leader's den, where Bouncestep was talking with Stonestar. She awkwardly shifted toward them just so she could hear a little bit. Then she began to groom herself.

"...she should probably come back," Stonestar licked a paw and brought it against his muzzle to smooth his whiskers. "We've let her stay a long time past due."

Bouncestep tilted his head slightly side to side as he seemed to weigh the circumstances, "Perhaps. But they may need her a little longer."

"Well," Stonestar shifted in his spot, "you should take a small patrol and go talk with her."

Bouncestep nodded, "Who do you think I should take?"

Stonestar noticed Ashfrost quietly grooming herself, "How about

Ashfrost and Snowberry. Her daughter and a close friend."

Bouncestep dipped his head and called out to the she-warrior, "Ashfrost, come with me on a patrol to CloudClan!"

She turned her head to look at them. She gave her chest fur a couple more licks then nodded, "Sure."

Bouncestep looked around the camp, probably to see if Snowberry was awake. He realized she wasn't and asked Ashfrost to wake her up.

The gray she-cat walked into the warrior's den, looking around for Snowberry's white pelt. Carefully stepping through the furry masses of cats, she reached Snowberry and prodded her in the side.

"Hey," Ashfrost whispered. "We're going on a patrol to CloudClan."

The white she-cat's head rose as she yawned, "Alright, I'll be out in a moment."

Ashfrost gingerly hopped out and joined Bouncestep as they waited a couple of moments for Snowberry to arrive. Eventually, she did and then they left.

Lynxtail was standing guard outside of CloudClan's camp entrance. His gaze was welcoming for a moment, but he realized that he shouldn't be as open to them as he once was. He let his neck fur bristle.

"What business do you have here?" He snarled.

Bouncestep twitched his whiskers, slightly amused, "Stonestar sent us to talk with Featherwing."

"Were these other two warriors necessary if all you needed to do was talk?" Lynxtail flicked his tail irritably.

Bouncestep grumbled under his breath, "He just told me to take a small patrol, alright? Can we please be allowed to go talk to Featherwing."

"Alright," Lynxtail muttered. "Go on in."

The patrol waltzed into the camp, amazed at what they saw. To Ashfrost, it seemed like the camp was *shining*. It looked brand new. The weather of newleaf had brought the camp's appearance to it's prime. The leaves were their brightest green and the bark was a smooth, warm color of brown. Ashfrost almost felt like she was at home.

"Intruders!" A smooth-furred, brown she-kit came racing across the meadow and barrelled into Ashfrost's legs. She batted them playfully as she let harmless hisses emerge from her throat.

Ashfrost's throat rumbled at the kit's enthusiasm. Eventually, a russet tom-kit ran out of the nursery to join his sister, Squirrelkit. Then Spiderkit came running out to join Russetkit. The three kits tumbled with each other with no mercy. Of course, their claws were sheathed, but they wrestled like they'd never be able to again.

Lilyfur came hustling out of the nursery to retrieve her kits, "I'm so, so sorry."

Snowberry purred, "Don't worry, they amuse us more than anything else."

The queen halted, "Oh, okay. I'll let them play then, as long as they aren't bothering you." She raised her voice at the last part to make sure the kits heard that as well.

Featherwing was adjusting bedding in one of the tree dens when she spotted the patrol, "Ashpaw! Snowberry!"

She carefully climbed down from where she was and ran over to the patrol. She rested her head on Ashfrost's and touched noses with Snowberry.

She looked at Ashfrost, "It's so good to see you again, Ashpaw. How are the others doing?"

Ashfrost shuffled her feet, "I'm Ashfrost now."

Featherwing's gaze darkened, "Why wasn't I invited to the

ceremony?"

Ashfrost shrugged, *I wanted you to be there, but that wasn't up to me.*

"I'm so sorry I wasn't there," Featherwing's voice was cracking, as if she were about to tear up.

Ashfrost looked up at her slightly, "Featherwing, it's okay. It's not anything to get worked up about."

She nodded, "You're right. So, why are you guys here?"

Bouncestep flicked his tail, "Stonestar wants you back."

Featherwing flattened her ears in surprise, "You're right, I sort of. . . forgot about coming back. I've been so busy helping out and hunting."

"Can't they hunt?" Bouncestep referred to the warriors.

"They do! We all do."

Heronstar appeared from his enlarged nest in the High Tree. He climbed out onto the branch from where he spoke and looked down at the patrol, "What's going on?"

"How willing are you to let go of Featherwing?" Bouncestep called up to him.

He flicked his tail, "Having her around to mentor an apprentice would be rather helpful, I was thinking of keeping her until they became warriors. An extra paw would be great, considering our size."

Bouncestep let out a growl that could be heard from cats on the ground, yet inaudible to Heronstar, "You're basically just taking a warrior away from us."

Heronstar shook his head, "That's not what I intend. We don't have enough warriors to-"

"Dinselpelt and Lynxtail are your warriors, correct? Blazewing is also your deputy. A deputy can mentor as well."

The leader inclined his head, "I know that, Bouncestep. I understand your concern, but we still really need Featherwing with us. Blazewing must be able to worry about his duties as a deputy, not an apprentice. He won't have time to assign patrols."

Bouncestep snarled, "What makes you think he can't? I literally just had an apprentice of mine become a warrior and guess what? I'm the deputy!"

Heronstar's fur bristled, "Blazewing is definitely not as experienced as you and such explains why he shouldn't take on an apprentice as well. Featherwing is yet to teach us everything."

Featherwing nodded, "I do want to come home, Bouncestep. But I want this Clan to thrive, and for that to happen, I must stay until they become warriors."

"How old are the kits?" Queried Snowberry.

Heronstar hesitated, "Three moons."

Bouncestep unsheathed his claws, "You're trying to take one of our warriors for nine more moons? Nonsense! Stonestar will have none of this! Featherwing, you're coming with us."

Featherwing took a step back, "Bouncestep, I can't, I need to stay here."

Bouncestep narrowed his eyes, "Sure. Defy your deputy. I will notify Stonestar about this. And if he wants you home? You're coming home!"

Chapter Eight

It's been two quarter-moons since Ashfrost and the patrol went to go fetch Featherwing. After Featherwing and Heronstar refused, Stonestar did not share the same anger that Bouncestep had about the situation. Stonestar agreed that it may be a good decision. Plus, Featherwing was teaching them new skills that should be unique to CloudClan. So she would know the moves that they used, therefore it could be used against them if a battle ever needed to occur.

These past two quarter-moons, Ashfrost has been noticeably uncomfortable. It felt as if she had a bellyache, and today it was worse than it ever has. She dragged herself around camp, feeling unusually heavier than before.

Treefur was the first to notice, or to at least point out, her condition, "Ashfrost, are you okay? Your fur is all ragged and you look like you haven't slept in moons. Have you been eating a lot lately?"

Ashfrost thought about it, in fact, she'd been eating normally. Had she been overeating? She pushed the thought away and replied, "I just haven't been feeling like myself lately. I didn't know I looked so bad."

"Have you been feeling different?"

"A little bloated. I guess I need to cut down on the prey," Ashfrost began to walk away. "Thanks for telling me."

"Ash-" She wasn't able to hear the rest, or Treefur just stopped talking once he realized she was out of earshot.

Ashfrost was extremely tired despite just having slept in rather late. She yawned and decided to go take another nap. However, on the way there, her belly started to churn. She froze in her tracks as she felt her belly lurch and gurgle. Her throat convulsed as she gagged on the rising bile. With a loud choking sound, she vomited on the ground. She collapsed in fatigue.

Mousefoot had just entered into camp, a shrew in his jaws. His eyes widened, he dropped the mouse and sprinted over to her, "Ashfrost!"

Ashfrost hardly felt him nudge her and was barely aware of cats crowding around her.

"Flowerstorm!" Some cat called out.

The she-cat emerged from the medicine den and rushed over to Ashfrost, "What happened?"

"She just threw up!" Fernpaw exclaimed.

"Out of nowhere?" Flowerstorm pressed.

The apprentice nodded.

"Ashfrost, can you talk?" Flowerstorm ran her paw through Ashfrost's fur.

"Yes," Ashfrost groaned. "But I don't really want to."

"Come into my den. . . can you? Or do you need help?"

Ashfrost pushed herself up, her belly swaying side to side. She felt like vomiting again, but she tightened her throat, determined to keep the bile down. She staggered after Flowerstorm and into the medicine den.

"Lay on your side," Flowerstorm ordered.

Ashfrost laid on her side, glad to not have to stand anymore. She was panting from the short walk. All she wanted to do was sleep.

Flowerstorm groomed Ashfrost for her and ordered Fernpaw to bring her prey. She ran her paw across Ashfrost's soft belly. A loud purr erupted from the medicine cat.

"Ashfr-"

Fernpaw jogged into the den and lay the shrew Mousefoot had caught in front of Ashfrost. Flowerstorm ordered him to go away. The medicine cat sat down in front of the tired she-cat.

"Ashfrost?"

"Yes?" Ashfrost said after she swallowed a bite of shrew.

"Ashfrost, you're pregnant," she purred.

Chewed up prey fell out of Ashfrost's mouth, *What? How am I preg - oh. . . I'm pregnant?!?*

"You're kidding."

The medicine cat shook her head, "Nope. You're carrying kits for sure, and it seems like a lot of them."

Joyful tears fell from Ashfrost's eyes, "I'm pregnant! You have to fetch Mousefoot!"

She shook her head again, "You're too tired, Ashfrost. You need to sleep before you excite yourself again with Mousefoot."

Ashfrost sighed, "Okay."

The she-cat left her to rest, and Ashfrost found it disturbingly hard to fall asleep. After tossing and turning for what seemed like hours, she finally sunk into her slumber.

Ashfrost was able to convince Flowerstorm and Stonestar that she was still fit for warrior duties. She couldn't bear to even think of laying around in the nursery and doing absolutely nothing. First,

she wanted to help her Clan while she could. Second, she hated sitting around, therefore, she needed to be doing something!

It's been a quarter-moon since she was announced pregnant, and she was waiting for the right time to tell Mousefoot, for he was the father. *Maybe tonight*, Ashfrost thought. Tonight was the Gathering, perhaps telling Mousefoot after the Gathering, it would be fine.

Ashfrost felt like hunting, so she padded contently out of camp and into the prey-plentiful forest. She parted her jaws as she waited for a scent to bathe her tongue. After walking around for a few minutes, she finally caught a whiff of vole. She followed the scent until she located it by its burrow, scratching at the ground for hopes of food. Ashfrost checked the wind's direction, delighted to know that the vole's scent was drifting towards her and would not detect her. She slowly placed her paws in front of her as she crept forward. The vole did not have it's back toward her but wasn't facing her entirely. Once she was close enough, Ashfrost pounced, landing right where the vole was supposed to be.

Hissing, she realized it went down its burrow.

"Fox-dung!" She snapped at herself, she should've approached from a different angle.

She hunted for a while longer, ending up in successfully catching a shrew and two mice by the end of her hunt. Ashfrost took a minute to fit all the prey in her mouth, but once she was able to, she brought it back to camp. Stonestar was sitting outside his den with Bouncestep, preparing to call out the cats for the Gathering.

"Bouncestep, Flowerstorm, Ashfrost, Sootpelt, Frostleaf, Scorpionfang, Yellowgaze, Rainfall, Fernpaw, Beechpaw, Ratpaw, Bluepaw, and Aspenpaw, you will all come with me to the Gathering!" He announced firmly.

Ashfrost was giddy with joy, she couldn't wait to break the news to Mousefoot!

Stonestar flicked his tail, "LightningClan is bustling with new additions. We have five new warriors with us today, Ashfrost,

Frostleaf, Scorpionfang, Sootpelt, and Rainfall!"

The Clans cheered their names, a new warrior to any Clan was a great thing to celebrate.

"We also have five new apprentices, Fernpaw mentored by Rainfall. Beechpaw mentored by Snowberry and Ratpaw mentored by Scorpionfang. Bluepaw mentored by Frostleaf and Aspenpaw mentored by Sootpelt."

More cheering.

"Our queen, Ambersong, will soon resume her duty as a deputy once her kits become apprentices. We also have a cat who will soon enter the nursery, Ashfrost."

Ashfrost felt her ears grow hot with embarrassment as cats looked at her with curiosity. A newly made warrior already carrying kits? It sounded bizarre to most cats.

Stonestar retreated backward a step from the front of the Boulder of Stars, allowing another leader to speak. Pebblestar stepped forward with a prideful gleam in her eyes.

"BreezeClan has three new warriors! Dustear, Lilyfoot, and Smokeslip!" She crowed happily. But then her gaze darkened, "However, our oldest elder Birdjaw has fallen ill. She was too sick to make it today. Cloudheart believes that, due to her age, she won't live much longer."

Sadness and despair hung in the air around them. The feeling was so heavy, Ashfrost wanted to crawl inside of her pelt to hide from it. Birdjaw had been a well-respected warrior who served longer than she should've due to her stubborn loyalty. She had been around for a long time, since the times of Lurking Shadow, even.

Then Whitestar stood up, "It is with great sadness that we announce Duskwaters' death. He has been with us for years beyond even my birth, and his loyalty was never doubtful. Rowanpaw, his apprentice, was named by StarClan as Rowanwhisper and serves us readily.

"We are struggling with the moons to come. Cloudpaw will be taking on Tallwatcher, an elder, as her mentor, as we need the other three warriors in our camp to take on the three kits to become apprentices next moon. Tallwatcher has agreed to it without pressure, assuring us he would like to apprentice one last time before he walked on StarClan's grasses."

The Clans were going through a warrior shortage, that was well-known. RainClan had only three warriors in their camp, BreezeClan only slightly more. GloomClan was a little more than BreezeClan at best. LightningClan was flourishing at the moment, and soon the other Clans would catch up. Of that much, Ashfrost was sure.

Emberstar now spoke, "GloomClan is well. We have two new apprentices. Echopaw mentored by Shadowpelt. And Whiskerpaw mentored by Brindletooth."

"CloudClan is also well. We have three kits to become apprentices next moon," Heronstar dipped his head and the ceremony ended.

Ashfrost recalled the Gathering later that night. A few cats have died, but many have become warriors and apprentices. The pros outweighed the cons, as usual. She purred in her sleep and drifted off.

Chapter Nine

[image]

Bonus: The picture above is what Rainfall looks like.

A little over a moon later, Ashfrost was forced into the nursery. The overwhelming, yet inevitable, feeling of boredom flowed through her veins. She was stuck in a nest for a couple to a few more quarter moons. She felt like a kit itching to become an apprentice once more. However, it was a tolerable experience because of the peace and quiet that she received, and likely to never feel again. At least until she was an elder, but who knows if she'll make it that far? Ashfrost didn't mind if she died before witnessing the peace of being an elder.

It was supposed to be greenleaf. Ashfrost snorted to herself at such a thought. Since the warm and welcoming rays of greenleaf touched the forest, she hasn't been able to see the sky. Usually, greenleaf was notorious for its empty, cloudless skies and warm days. But this greenleaf was unlike others. The senior warriors - if you could call them that since the oldest warriors in camp were actually pretty young - and Yang, the Clan's only elder, kept murmuring about how this season was unusual. Ashfrost sniffed, it *must* be pretty unusual if Yang thinks so. Imagine all the greenleafs he's witnessed.

The day, like many others since Ashfrost moved into the nursery, slowly faded by. The newly-made queen felt like she was wasting her time. There had to be *something* she could do. She stood up with a bit of struggle. Not only did the added weight to her belly make it hard, but her limbs ached from laying down nearly all day. She shoved the feeling aside and made her way over to the medicine den, which was connected to the nursery. Inside, Flowerstorm was

sorting through herbs. Each herb was in a pile of its own, and a small pile off to the side for the dead, shriveled ones that received too much sunlight, or too little.

"Flowerstorm?" Ashfrost coughed a little to get the medicine cat's attention.

The calico she-cat looked up from what she was doing, "Yes, Ashfrost? Are you okay?"

"Fine," Ashfrost looked around in fake curiosity. "I was wondering if there was anything I could do? My boredom is killing me these days, the hours tick by and it tortures me as if there were hundreds of mice right in front of me and I could not kill them."

Flowerstorm thought for a moment, "Hm, not much I can think of. You're welcome to walk about the camp, but come back shortly. Your quarter-moonly check-up is due today."

Ashfrost looked away so the medicine cat couldn't catch her rolling her eyes. After doing so, she nodded at the she-cat, "Thank you, I will do just that."

But really, she had another plan.

Ashfrost had snuck through the dirtplace to avoid the entrance guard, Longwhisker. She had made it to the river, right outside LightningClan territory. Just a little to her left, and she'd be in CloudClan. A little to her right, GloomClan. If she crossed the river and walked a little ways, she would be at Four Stars. If she kept going in that same direction and crossed the river *again*, she would be in BreezeClan, but a little to the left and. . . RainClan. That's where she wanted to go. Ashfrost had no reason for wanting to go, but she felt like being dangerous.

Lucky for her, the river was rather shallow. At least, it's what normal sized cats would call shallow waters. For Ashfrost, it was up to the base of her tail at the deepest point, but it was low enough for her to cross. She dipped her forelegs in and gradually brought the rest of her body in. It was warm from the sunlight, but it still sent chills down Ashfrost's spine. She had a higher tolerance for

water than most LightningClan cats, not that she knew why, but it still soaked her fur and made her body feel like a clumsy lump that was difficult to control. A few moments later, she emerged and trucked past Four Stars.

However, the river here was not shallow, and rather deep. Ashfrost estimated it would be to the top of her shoulder blades, so only her neck and head would stick out. She shrugged and hopped into the middle of the river to avoid swimming as much as possible. Once again, her fur weighed her down uncomfortably, but she made it to the other side.

The queen shook her fur to relieve herself of some weight. She groaned as she felt her belly sway side to side uncomfortably. At least she felt a little lighter. She looked around, she was on the rim of the river, which was legal in the code. The Clan territories stopped a tail-length away from the river, technically making the river unclaimed territory, free to roam by all. Right in front of her were the moors of BreezeClan land. She shuddered at the thought of feeling so vulnerable, no trees to protect you and the wing constantly clinging to you as you ran. Ashfrost didn't understand how BreezeClan tolerated it, but they were probably just as confused as to why she stuck with the trees.

She veered to the left to RainClan's side. She took a small breath and stepped into the territory. Hopefully the musky river water would hide most of her scent. RainClan weren't known for their noses, they hardly used them in terms of prey. All they needed to do was swipe fish out of the river, no scenting needed except for when the river freezes up.

She kept walking until she heard the small chatter of a normal Clan camp. Silently, she crawled into a bush and crouched in a position where she could see and hear all that went on around her.

Crashclaw, the RainClan deputy, was walking around assigning a patrol.

"Today's border patrol!" He called out. "Tallwatcher, Cloudpaw, and Brackenstep! Check the borders."

Ashfrost cursed under her breath, desperately hoping the patrol wouldn't catch her scent.

Slatefur, the deputy's mate, walked up to him, "Why didn't you put me on the patrol? You know I am fully capable of working!"

He glared at her with a mixture of slight anger and love, "You arrogant furball, you're carrying our kits!"

"I've been carrying for only two quarter-moons!" She protested.

"Taking all precautions." He argued.

Slatefur sniffed, "You're so careful and lawful now that you're the deputy. I miss the rebellious and young side of you."

Crashclaw looked offended, "I'm deputy, Slatefur, I can't fool around like an apprentice anymore. I've been entrusted with this title, and I will live up to it as the warrior code says."

Ashfrost thought about leaving. She had been there for a while and staying any longer would cause concerns back at home. To her dismay, she missed the beginning of Slatefur's statement.

"...code?" Slatefur growled. "The warrior code has some dumb rules in it. Including rules that cats break all the time! Even you broke the code when you chose a mate from LightningClan!" She seemed to choke on the Clan name like it was poison.

Ashfrost nearly choked on her saliva. Crashclaw had taken a mate from her Clan? But she couldn't recall any queens who had carried and given birth without a father.

Slatefur whisked her tail, "LightningClan. . . out of all the Clans you had to choose from, you chose a warrior from the bossy, snotty, annoying, LightningClan! Not to mention she left you right? When was the last time you two talked?"

Crashclaw was definitely offended now, whether Slatefur was intending to or not, "We aren't mates anymore, Slatefur! You hardly know her and you're already blanketing her with stupid stereotypes. We had an argument and we just never really made up for it and

being in different Clans drifted us away, especially since we were exposed by some dumb warrior."

"I miss when you broke the rules though!" Slatefur whined. "I don't like it now that you're so uptight and true to the code. That's not the tom I decided to have as my mate."

Crashclaw let out a low, deep growl, "Slatefur, you're getting on my nerves again with the complaining! Featherwing is out of the picture! Her kits are out of the picture! You weren't so complain-y when we became mates, but if you can't change it, you will be out of the picture too. Even worse, we're in the same Clan, and you'll have to see me every day knowing that it was your fault."

Slatefur snarled, "Leave me alone, Crashclaw! You're always-"

Ashfrost cut off from listening to the conversation, her heart was pounding. It thrummed so hard against her chest and her warm blood coursed through her limbs. She wasn't sure whether to be happy or sad, she was a mess of emotions. She realized she was panting and regulated her breathing, lest some other cat heard her.

She wanted to yowl out the news to everyone. Crashclaw was her father! She had known it all along! Her excitement quickly faded and she narrowed her eyes. She had been lied to! Sootpelt and Rainfall never doubted that their father had been Pikeleap.

She hadn't realized the RainClan patrol left, because now they ran back into camp, Cloudpaw in front. But. . . Brackenstep was missing.

"Crashclaw! We've scented an unfamiliar scent right outside our border. It seems they have walked into our territory. It smells slightly of LightningClan, but it's too light to tell."

"Where's Brackenstep?" The deputy asked, still in a slightly harsh tone from his recent argument.

"He went to follow the trail," Cloudpaw tilted her head.

Crashclaw growled, "If we find that cat, they'll be sorry they ever touched-"

Ashfrost's heart was thumping even faster, she'd been discovered. She jumped behind her to run along the BreezeClan-RainClan border and back across the river. But something tugged on her scruff, she thought it was a branch and tried to unsnag herself but she found that the grip on her felt a lot like teeth. She was dropped and turned over.

Horror flowed through her body as she realized that the bracken tabby pinning her down was Brackenstep.

Chapter Ten

Ashfrost yelped and flailed around helplessly. She started tossing around lies to protect herself from being imprisoned. But Brackenstep was a strong, young tom, and his grip seemed like iron claws on her scruff. Wailing, she kept throwing the argument that she was a lost queen at the warrior. Maybe he'd falter and she could bolt away. However, running would be hard with a belly full of kits.

"Shut up!" Brackenstep threw her on the ground once they reached the middle of the camp. She huffed and stood up, doing her best not to cower in fear.

Crashclaw looked at her from paw to ear-tip and sniffed, "A queen? What are you doing here, roaming around our territory?"

Ashfrost threw on a confused and fearful look to seem believable, "I'm really not sure how I got here. I was just walking around the river and. . ."

"Enough," he snorted. "Just tell me the truth and get it over with, you'll be kept here anyways."

She sighed and felt her face grow hot with embarrassment, "I was wandering around."

The deputy looked at her again, "Without your mentor, or another warrior?"

Ashfrost felt like she was stabbed in the heart. Her own father didn't recognize her, let alone he thought she was an apprentice!

"I'm a warrior," she tried not to snarl, but a small hint of it appeared in her tone.

He whisked his tail and muttered under his breath, "You look like her."

He folded his ears against his head, "I know you! You're Ashfrost, you went on the journey to find *CloudClan*."

She sighed and stared at the ground.

"Just getting yourself mixed up in a bunch of stuff that isn't your problem, huh?" He growled and nodded to Brackenstep. "Keep her by the elder's den while I lead a patrol to LightningClan to inform Stonestar."

Ashfrost didn't take another moment to hesitate. She spun around and ran as fast as she could, her belly like another twenty pounds, slowing her down.

"Come back!" Brackenstep hissed. From the rather audible tone of his voice, Ashfrost guessed he wasn't far behind.

She jumped as far as she could into the river, only a couple tail-lengths away from the bank. She crawled up and sprinted straight past Four Stars, her flanks heaving painfully as she fought for breath. She halted as she reached the river once more and looked behind her, Brackenstep pounding towards her.

He can't climb, she thought.

Ashfrost didn't dare waste time as she ran back to Four Stars and leaped onto RainClan's Tree, scrabbling up it as high as she dared.

"LightningClan will pay for this!" Brackenstep snarled as he pawed hopelessly against the tree bark. "We don't need naughty apprentices like you wandering around!"

"Ashfrost?" She recognized Mousefoot's voice. She gulped and saw a small LightningClan patrol emerge from the waters.

Stonestar was in the lead, Mousefoot and Snowberry behind him,

plus Fernpaw.

"Ashfrost what is the meaning of this?" Stonestar seemed to be asking her, but he was looking at Brackenstep.

"She was eavesdropping on our camp!" Brackenstep growled.

The LightningClan leader seemed taken back, "Excuse me?"

Ashfrost slowly climbed down the tree. As soon as she touched the ground, she felt small droplets of rain on her pelt.

"Is this true, Ashfrost?" Stonestar growled.

She slowly nodded. Ashfrost wouldn't dare lie to Stonestar. All she wanted to do was see Crashclaw, her *father*. Disappoint flooded her heart as she remembered the look on his face as he recognized her. He was disgusted with his own daughter.

"Argh! To think such a good warrior, or a queen at the moment, would do something so horrid!" Stonestar nodded to his patrol to come flank her, and they began to go back home. Brackenstep never lifted his gaze off of them until they were no more than specks in the distance.

"An explanation please?" Stonestar didn't look back at her.

"I wanted to see him," Ashfrost walked behind her leader, her fur now heavy with rain and her head hanging low.

"Who?"

"My father."

"And that is?" Stonestar was clearly annoyed with her unintentionally vague answers.

"Crashclaw. He was Featherwing's mate. Pikeleap was our supposed sub-father before he died in the Great Battle," she sighed.

"Right," Stonestar flicked his tail. "I always knew that Pikeleap wasn't your father. I knew that your mother broke the warrior code,

however, she is a good warrior and a mother. I wouldn't dare exile her."

Relief began to flood Ashfrost but was abruptly stopped when Stonestar spoke again.

"But for whatever reason, what you did was uncalled for. Eavesdropping on another Clan? Leaving LightningClan camp without an escort? Imagine what would have happened, had we not come along."

"I wasn't trying to spy! By spying I mean not trying to glean information. I just...StarClan, this is not an excuse but...I was just bored."

"Not like I can help you with that!" Stonestar hissed lowly. "You're the one that decided to burden yourself with kits, so deal with it."

Anger welled up inside the queen, "Burdened? Kits are not a burden! They are a blessing. Of course you wouldn't know because one: you are not a father and two: you aren't a she-cat! Don't you dare call kits a burden. You might as well call your own warriors a burden!"

Stonestar flicked his tail irritably, "Calm down, you're overreacting." Still, he refused to make eye contact as they began to walk through the familiar woods of LightningClan territory.

"Calm down?" Ashfrost hissed. "You do not tell a she-cat to—"

Pain stabbed in her belly. Ashfrost gasped and fell to the ground, attempting to snarl the pain away. Her belly tightened frequently and consistently. . . She had to be—

Snowberry yowled, "Pick her up! We have to get her to Flowerstorm! She's having her kits early!"

Ashfrost grunted as she felt herself moved upright and flanked. Her paws helplessly dragged across the floor.

"Hurry!" Stonestar groaned with effort.

This time, Ashfrost's belly constricted with more pain than it had been. She yowled and her body spasmed enough for her to fall from the support Snowberry and Stonestar had been giving her.

"Fernpaw, go retrieve Flowerstorm, now!" Stonestar hissed.

Ashfrost was vaguely aware of the pattering of his paws. Her vision was dark, but not completely. She was only aware of the rain and Snowberry's paw running over her flank. Ashfrost blinked before she passed out.

When Ashfrost woke up again, the sound of the rain seemed distant. Her vision had returned and she felt a soft nest underneath her. But there was something else. . .She looked at her swollen belly to see four small balls of fur suckling. A loud purr erupted from her. *Her kits*. It was a happy scene. She could've stared at them for hours before she noticed the presence of Featherwing, Mousefoot, and Flowerstorm.

"Good, you're awake," Flowerstorm purred loudly but cut herself off. "I'm sorry."

"What's wrong?" Ashfrost frowned at her.

Flowerstorm turned around and bent over. She faced Ashfrost again with a limp kit in her jaws. Horror and anxiety struck Ashfrost's heart.

"Is she—?"

"She didn't make it. She was stillborn, Ashfrost," Flowerstorm set down the small, shriveled white kit. "Would you like to send her to StarClan with a name?"

Ashfrost swallowed her sorrow and nodded. She had a name in mind but caught Flowerstorm's gaze. There was sadness in Flowerstorm's eyes. But that sadness was mixed with a hint of longing.

"Would you like to name her?" The queen offered.

Flowerstorm widened her eyes, "No, I shouldn't. She is your kit."

"And I want you to name her," Ashfrost allowed a soft purr to rumble through her throat.

The medicine cat's breathing seemed to slow, "Really?"

"Please do," Ashfrost felt Mousefoot's tail caress her flank and she looked at him with affection.

"If I ever had a tom-kit, I would've named him after my father. As this is not the case, I will name her what my father almost named me. Heatherkit," Flowerstorm touched her nose to the body.

"Please, bury her," Ashfrost pleaded. "I cannot bear to look at such a sad scene. I love her and she will understand."

Flowerstorm hesitated, "Right." And left with the kit.

Mousefoot came around and layed by her. She looked at him and asked, "Was that okay with you? That Flowerstorm named her?"

"I was more than fine with it," he purred.

"We should name these ones," Ashfrost nudged one of the irresistibly cute kits by her belly. He squealed in protest and began suckling again.

Mousefoot beckoned to the one on the end by Ashfrost's tail. She was a dark gray tabby yet had a weird exception of a tan muzzle and belly fur, "How about Lilykit?"

"It suits her," Ashfrost rumbled and flicked her tail around her kits protectively. She looked behind her to see Featherwing, "Would you like to name one?"

She shook her head, "They are yours, you decide what to do with them."

Ashfrost grumbled sarcastically, "That's why I want you to name one."

Featherwing rolled her eyes in fake sarcasm and pointed to the light brown tom by Ashfrost's head, "What about Olivekit?"

"That's perfect."

Mousefoot flicked his tail toward a dark cream tom. He was almost a light brown, but light brown seemed too dark to describe him.

"Thornkit?"

"Beautiful," Ashfrost muttered to herself as she looked at the last one. A tortoiseshell tom. Definitely not seen very often. She purred, "Kestrelkit."

"They're so cute," Featherwing rumbled.

Ashfrost layed her head down in exhaustion, "Of course they are."

Chapter Eleven

Sootpelt's POV

Gatherings were so useless to Sootpelt. Why should he care what happened in the other Clans? All he needed to do was to know about and protect his own Clan. He kept muttering to himself impatiently as Stonestar led him and other warriors to the full moon Gathering.

Rainfall stepped up beside him, "Can you believe it? Your sister just had kits, now my mate is having kits!"

Sootpelt shrugged, "So, what?"

"Sooooo," Rainfall dragged on, "You should step up your game! Find a mate, carry on your lineage. Are you going to be the odd one out?"

"Finding a mate is not of my interest," Sootpelt muttered. "Nor do I need clumsy, annoying kits tumbling around and over my paws while I'm trying to serve LightningClan."

Rainfall flicked his ear, "You're so uptight."

"You're too loose," He snapped. "Haven't you ever thought that being formal is better for the Clan?"

His brother scanned the area around them as they walked, "Nnnnope."

Sootpelt rolled his eyes, "Typical."

"You can cut back on the retorts," the warrior huffed.

They walked in silence for a few moments longer until they reached Four Stars. Sootpelt gingerly found a spot in the back of

LightningClan's area and waited patiently for the meeting to start.

He gazed at the arriving Clans while he thought to himself. Sootpelt had always wondered what it would be like to *love*. Yet he had never felt it. Never had a crush or a longing for a cat. He never had even felt a special connection to family. Sometimes he felt like the odd one out. Sootpelt hissed to himself, *You're not the odd one, you are the leader, the superior one! The other two are pure losers.*

Emberstar stood up on the boulder, "Let the Gathering begin!"

"GloomClan is well. Whiskerpaw and Echopaw are now warriors: Whiskerblaze and Echoeyes," the leader gleamed.

"Whiskerblaze! Echoeyes!" The Clans cheered while Sootpelt reigned in silence. He never understood the point of cheering for other cats.

"Echoeyes is also carrying Shadowpelt's kits," Emberstar purred before sitting down.

Whitestar stood up with his green eyes in narrowed slits, "RainClan is well. We have three new apprentices: Songpaw, Jaypaw, and Sandpaw. Slatefur is also carrying my deputy's kits. Our border patrols are being doubled, even if they are bored out of their minds throwing *stones* into the river. Also, Splashstream has retired to the elder's den." With the last part, he glared at Stonestar for a few moments before letting back and sitting down.

"Songpaw! Jaypaw! Sandpaw!"

Then...

"Splashstream, we thank you for your service."

Stonestar cleared his throat, "Ashfrost has given birth to four healthy kits while Frostleaf just moved in. We have three new apprentices: Dawnpaw, Sharppaw, and Tigerpaw. Ambersong has returned to her place as deputy."

"Dawnpaw! Sharppaw! Tigerpaw!" Sootpelt grunted in annoyance as every-cat cheered again.

Pebblestar stood up with a wince, making Sootpelt vaguely wonder if she was hurt. Yet, the leader didn't show any falter in her voice as she spoke, "Leopardstep is carrying Dustear's kits. That is all."

Heronstar then, in turn, got on all fours to speak, "CloudClan is thriving with three new apprentices: Squirrelpaw, Russetpaw, and Spiderpaw. Lilyfur is also carrying another litter of Lynxtail's kits. This Gathering is at an end."

Stonestar hopped down and started talking to Ambersong. The deputy nodded every now and then as they spoke. Sootpelt sighed and wished he could be in her place. Oh, what he would give to be the deputy.

Then an idea popped into his head.

Chapter Twelve

Sootpelt watched Ashfrost's kits frolic around with disgust. The admiration that Ashfrost showed to her kits—and which was returned to her—was unfathomable to Sootpelt. A true warrior had no time for kits. Especially Sootpelt. He had plans to escalate in only a certain amount of time.

Sootpelt trotted up to Ambersong and requested to lead the dawn patrol. She inclined her head and called out the rest of the patrol. Rainfall, Scorpionfang, Fernpaw, and Ratpaw.

"That's a large patrol," Sootpelt commented neutrally.

"Because I want you to bring back extra prey. The pile is low and now we have two queens. Don't falter under my order. Bring back plenty."

"Alright," he agreed and joined the patrol at the entrance and led them into the forest.

"Catch as much as you can!" He called back. "The pile is low and needs to be stocked."

He assigned the patrol on the area in which they should hunt and he then went on his own.

His senses tingled as the presence of two mice came apparent to him. Sootpelt crept forward carefully as he followed the scent. When he came within view, the warrior twitched his whiskers in

amusement at the two young mice. Sootpelt adjusted his position and pounced, conveniently able to crush both of them with each paw.

He picked up the limp bodies of prey and dug a shallow hole to drop them in. He then moved on to catch more prey. The more loyal he acted, the more loyal he'd be seen as. Sootpelt had to take every opportunity he could.

When the patrol met back up, it turned out everyone had been waiting on Sootpelt for a while. The warrior had had to go back and forth several times to transfer all eleven pieces of prey he caught. He'd have to do so again to take the prey back to camp. With a quick apology, he observed the other catches. Rainfall had caught four; two mice, a blackbird, and a shrew. Fernpaw caught two mice. Ratpaw got his paws on three catches as well; a finch, a thrush, and a squirrel. Scorpionfang had caught three; one mouse, a vole, and a bird that Sootpelt oddly remembered seeing at Twolegplaces very frequently.

"What is that?" Sootpelt poked the Twolegplace bird with an extended claw.

"It's a pigeon," Scorpionfang shrugged. "We saw them when we gathered remnants of CloudClan in the Twolegplace. Haven't seen any around here before."

"Odd," Sootpelt commented. "A migration?"

Ratpaw flicked his tail, "How could it be a migration if they've never migrated here before?"

Fernpaw batted his brother gently, "Maybe their former migration place became unfit for settlement! You should use your brain more often."

"Do not quarrel," Sootpelt growled as he cut off Ratpaw's incoming retort. "We have to get back so I can train my apprentice."

"Aspenpaw? She's so bossy!" Ratpaw sniffed. "Doesn't she annoy you?"

"Often," Sootpaw twitched his whiskers in amusement before he stood up. "Let's get the prey back to camp."

"Stonestar?"

"Sootpelt, come in."

Sootpelt padded into the leader's den with the pigeon in his jaws. He dropped it at the gray leader's feet.

"Scorpionfang caught this during the patrol today, we agreed that we'd bring it to your notice."

"A pigeon? Out here?" Stonestar sniffed it. "That's unusual."

"I was thinking what if there was a new threat in a previous migration path, then they transferred here?"

Stonestar's nose wrinkled, "Come, smell this."

Hesitantly, Sootpelt came forward and brought his nose to the freshly-caught pigeon. The strong scent of sickness wafted into his nose and he snapped his head back up.

"What is that!?" Sootpelt snarled in disgust. "Why does it smell so bad?"

"Don't be a mouse-brain," Stonestar scoffed. "It's clearly infected with something. Throw it out, quick."

"Sure thing, Stonestar," Sootpelt picked up the pigeon by its wing and made his way out of LightningClan territory and towards Shadow's Gorge.

By the time he made it to the deep ravine, Sootpelt gingerly dropped the bird and watched it fall with amusement. He was earning their respect, and quicker than he presumed.

Sootpelt chuckled softly to himself. His plan would take one more major step. The night before the full moon.

Chapter Thirteen

Sootpelt laughed softly to himself as he gazed at the stormy sky. Storm gloom has clouded the Clans for many quarter moons. Now, it was evident a large storm lay ahead. It added some sparkle to his plan. Finally, the night before the full moon has arrived.

Snickering, he turned toward Ambersong and padded over to where she sat by the leader's den.

"Ambersong," Sootpelt acted out of breath, "There is something odd about GloomClan's border. It seems that they are pushing into our territory."

Ambersong flicked her ear, "Typical GloomClan. I will send a patrol to check it out."

Sootpelt allowed his tail to twitch irritably, "I think you should see it. They're tail-lengths into our border."

The deputy eyed him, "And how do you know this?"

"I was out walking," Sootpelt didn't hesitate to cover this fake knowledge. "I needed to clear my mind. It was clouded with how I would help support the Clan once this storm arrives." He gazed back up at the sky for emphasis.

"Very well," Ambersong turned around. "Who should come with?"

"That is not necessary," He informed her.

"A patrol is usually three or more cats, Sootpelt," she frowned.

"You already sent out the border patrol," he noted.

"Bouncestep was on that patrol, he would've caught the change. . ."

"I arrived after the patrol, and the border change was very fresh."

Ambersong frowned at him again, "Fernpaw will come. He'll learn from this."

Sootpelt wanted to argue but instead, he sighed, "Very well."

Once Fernpaw joined them, they marched out the entrance and headed into the forest. Sootpelt's claws were tingling with impatience. Once they neared the border (but not by it yet), Sootpelt put his nose to the air. To his luck, he smelled a blackbird a little to his left.

"Fernpaw, go catch that blackbird."

"I'm not good at catching birds," Fernpaw stammered.

"Go catch it," Sootpelt snarled lightly.

With Ambersong, he neared the border. He waited patiently for her to bend down and survey it.

Before standing back up she said, "It seems fine to me. . ."

"Does it?" Sootpelt sniffed. "Odd."

Without warning, Sootpelt bounded behind her then pounced on her back. With a yowl of surprise, Ambersong found it hard to fight back. She rolled on her side, however, they were on a hill and they continued rolling. Sootpelt grunted as they barrelled down the hill. Once they came to a complete stop, Sootpelt slashed his claws across the deputy's cheek and jumped back.

"YOU!" Ambersong hissed. "Something has always been off about you, Sootpelt. I should've known."

He laughed, "But you didn't know."

"What is your goal. . .to kill me?" She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Precisely," Sootpelt unsheathed his claws again.

The deputy's fighting stance faltered as she realized she might die today. It was enough of a window for Sootpelt to leap at her again

and throw her on her back to expose her vulnerable underbelly. Without wasting time, he churned his hind claws through her soft flesh. Then he clamped a paw over her muzzle to stifle her screams of pain. But she intercepted him and threw him off.

"You won't get away with this!" She snarled and whisked away.

Sootpelt growled, Ambersong was likely running back to camp. She wouldn't get far. He sprinted after her; with only a few bounds he was at her tail. He leaped on her lower back, gradually dragging her body to the floor with his claws. He shoved Ambersong's muzzle into the dirt and dug his claws into the back of her neck. She wailed into the dirt and frantically struggled to get away from him. He rolled her over and pinned her down triumphantly.

"Stop! You're going to kill me!" She wailed. "I have a mate and kits! I have a duty to protect this Clan!"

"And you're failing," he breathed before placing all his weight in his paws and on her throat, choking her.

"Please!" She croaked while pawing at his forelegs.

He jumped his weight onto her throat. The pressure caused her to cough up blood.

"Say hello to StarClan for me," Sootpelt winked.

And just like that, she went limp. Her fur was only ruffled by the slight wind. As the rain started to fall, her fur became plastered to her body.

A rustle in the bushes distracted him. Sootpelt grunted and padded over, hooked a claw in Fernpaw's scruff, and brought him into the open.

"You k-killed her!" The apprentice shrieked.

"She was a bad cat," Sootpelt shook his head. "She was planning to drive our Clan to ruins once she became the leader."

"Does you killing her make you any better?" Fernpaw growled.

"I just saved your furry rump!" Sootpelt hissed. "Do I not get a 'thank you'?"

Before Fernpaw could reply, Sootpelt interrupted, "Don't speak of this to anyone else. Or I'll kill you myself."

Fernpaw just shriveled back into a ball as Sootpelt surveyed the deputy's body, picking out any scraps of his fur. The rain would wash out his scent.

With wide eyes and a gulp, Fernpaw nodded and solemnly followed the murderer back to camp. He watched as they left Ambersong's body, and he watched as the blood of the deputy washed off the warrior he once looked up to.

Chapter Fourteen

Sootpelt and Fernpaw burst into camp, their pelts heaving from sprinting such a far distance. Stonestar ran over with wide eyes of concern.

"What happened?" He urged.

Sootpelt shook his head wildly with fake disbelief, "A GloomClan patrol!" He gulped. "They. . .attacked us! They. . ."

Fernpaw gulped with flattened ears and managed to make out in a soft, stammering voice, "They k-killed A-Ambersong."

Stonestar's tail dropped to the ground, "What?!" Cats from all around camp perked their ears.

Bouncestep slowly padded over, "Ambersong?"

Sootpelt nodded slowly, "The patrol attacked us brutally. They thought we were trying to hunt on their borders. Ambersong fought with her life."

Bouncestep's stance wavered with shock. Tears welled up in his eyes, "No! She couldn't have. She's too strong and wouldn't leave us!"

He looked back up at Sootpelt, "She couldn't have left us! Where is she?"

"She's back by the border," Sootpelt sighed. "I should have brought her. I just figured. . ."

Stonestar laid his tail on Sootpelt's back, "I understand what you were trying to do. Let's go retrieve her now."

The patrol walked back through the seeping rain. It soaked their

pelts and made them slightly slower, yet the pulled forward. Fernpaw was twitching nervously from behind. Bouncestep calmly comforted him while trying to pull through his own tears.

"I'm sorry," Sootpelt groaned to Stonestar. "I was trying to protect Fernpaw. Adderblaze and Shadowpelt were swarming him."

"It is not your fault, Sootpelt," Stonestar grunted. "You protected a young cat. It was the right thing to do. What really worries me is why GloomClan would attack so brutally."

The dark gray warrior nodded, "Usually, GloomClan keeps to themselves. Emberstar prefers to avoid bloodshed."

"So why now?" Stonestar worried.

"We are approaching the site," Sootpelt hurried ahead of the patrol.

A few moments later, a gray and white rain-sodden body lay out in the open. There were slightly fresh wounds that had stopped bleeding as the deputy's heart had. Ambersong's eyes were clouded and empty, as her spirit has left her.

Bouncestep let out a wail and collapsed by his mate, "Ambersong. . . please, come back! I can't lose somebody else."

Stonestar and Sootpelt waited in sorrow as Bouncestep's fresh and overwhelming waves of grief poured out of him. The poor tom had lost his only love. The mother of his kits.

"Bouncestep," Stonestar whispered. "It's time to take her back to camp."

Bouncestep rose from his mate and looked at her solemnly. He brought a paw to her face and whispered something incoherent to Sootpelt's ears.

Stonestar walked over and grabbed the end of his deputy's spine, while Bouncestep had her scruff. Sootpelt and Fernpaw led them back to camp, where a ritual would take place and a new deputy would be chosen before moonhigh. Sootpelt looked at the sky where he saw that the moon was not visible so it must be rising.

They walked to camp in silence for their friend as the rain pelted them mercilessly. Sootpelt smiled to himself, hopefully, all would go well.

"Is. . .Is that mother?" Dawnpaw whimpered as the patrol dragged the limp deputy into the center of camp.

Tigerpaw stepped up beside her, "There's no way! That can't be her."

"It's her," Sharppaw growled. "Who did this to her?" He belted out empty threats as tears welled in his eyes. To Sootpelt's surprise, for a brief moment, he felt bad for killing Ambersong. But the feeling faded away as he realized that he would get what he wanted.

Stonestar narrowed his eyes as he brushed his tail along Ambersong's flank to smooth her ruffled fur. "A great deputy has fallen to a GloomClan patrol. She will be remembered, and would've made a better leader than I ever could be."

Gradually, cats overcame their shock and walked over to mourn her. Sootpelt stayed a couple tail-lengths back. He would feel awkward pretending to mourn the cat he killed. He has never had any afflictions for or with her. No connections whatsoever. He had no reason to mourn her. She had just been an obstacle in his way.

He watched as his sister and his brother both came to pay their sorrows to the fallen deputy. Sootpelt had to admit Ambersong was a good deputy. She defended her Clan, actively participated in patrols, frequently communicated with Stonestar, and hung out with her family.

Family. Sootpelt realized. He had to continue his bloodline. So after he drove fear into their Clanmates, if he ever fell from the hell of life, the fear would still emanate from his kits. He would live on forever! Sootpelt chuckled quietly to himself. Of all cats, who would be his mate?

His thoughts were distracted as Stonestar leaped onto the Great Boulder to announce the new deputy. Sootpelt's heart thrummed with anticipation.

"All cats who can catch prey for themselves, gather beneath the Great Boulder for a Clan meeting," the LightningClan leader waited as cats gathered their attention and directed it towards him.

"A great deputy was lost today. A great mother, mate, and friend. Ambersong joins the ranks of StarClan tonight, where she will never fade for many a decade. Let us now choose a deputy in her place."

Stonestar scanned his subjects, "Ambersong and I have recently talked about who should succeed her if she should die. I agree with her decision and it shall be made."

He looked up at the sky, "I say these words before StarClan, so that our warrior ancestors and the spirit of Ambersong may hear and approve of my decision. The new deputy of LightningClan will be Sootpelt."

Sootpelt's heart lifted with relief as he looked around to hear cats cheering his name.

"Sootpelt! Sootpelt! Sootpelt!"

He was deputy. Everything was falling into place too easily, he loved it.

"Now, we mourn our loss of Ambersong, whereas she will then be buried with other noble warriors who have fallen. Who would like to take her to her burial place at sunrise?"

Bouncestep, Yellowgaze, Longwhisker, and Mousefoot all volunteered. They were her family. Stonestar agreed and told them they would all rise early at sunrise to bury her.

Flowerstorm walked over with a good smelling herb in her jaws. Sootpelt watched as she chewed it into a pulp and rubbed the pulp on Ambersong's fur. After the scent of the herb was rubbed in, the medicine cat laid a branch of lavender on Ambersong, then bent her head down and whispered something before leaving back to the medicine den to tend to the queens and their kits. Sootpelt realized it was likely rosemary and lavender to hide the scent of death.

Everything was falling into place. Sootpelt would reach his goal

within a few moons, likely. He will drive LightningClan back into its place.

Chapter Fifteen

Back in Ashfrost's POV

It's been a moon since Sootpelt's deputy election and the mysterious murder of Ambersong. Most have accepted her death with a tinge of new hatred towards GloomClan. However, when Stonestar confronted them at the Gathering the night after, Emberstar had openly and non-hesitantly denied it. Of course, Ashfrost had gleaned this information from her brother, Rainfall.

Speaking of Rainfall, not many moons ago, he started chasing Frostleaf's tail. Apparently, Rainfall had had a crush on the she-warrior as an apprentice and into early warrior-hood. When he confessed he had learned that she had felt the same way. They became mates and soon after. . . Frostleaf was carrying kits. It's been two moons since she openly announced she was carrying kits, now she was supposedly very close to birthing them.

Ashfrost felt one of her kits bat the bridge of her nose. Yawning, she opened her eyes to see Olivekit playfully batting and gnawing at his mother's paws. Purring delightfully, Ashfrost knocked the kit down.

"Mooooom!" Olivekit rumbled as he fell on his back.

Ashfrost flicked her ear to rid herself of an annoying fly, then continued to say, "Olivekit, are you ready to become an apprentice tomorrow?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" He rolled over, stood up, and began jumping up and down.

Thornkit groaned in his nest next to Ashfrost's head, "Olivekit, be quiet!"

Lilykit turned around in her nest, "Yeah!"

"Wake up, sleepy-ears!" Ashfrost hummed as she gently prodded her kits.

"FINE!" Thornkit grunted and sat up in his nest to groom himself.

Lilykit sat up as well, "Whatever."

Ashfrost was so busy watching Thornkit, Lilykit, and Olivekit that she didn't notice Kestrelkit come up beside her and sit down. She jumped slightly in surprise.

"Oh, it's you Kestrelkit," Ashfrost sighed. "How are you doing?"

Kestrelkit drew a line in the dirt patch by his nest. The young tom hasn't ever spoken since birth, despite various check-ups with Flowerstorm proving that he should be able to speak. Ashfrost and Kestrelkit had developed a way of communication by drawing in the dirt. One line meant yes/good. Two lines meant no/bad. A circle meant "restate the question"/"I don't understand". Three slashes meant "Let's not talk about this".

"It's good to see that you're doing fine," she purred. "Are you sure you can't talk? Can you try for Mother?"

Kestrelkit flicked his ear in irritation and wrote two lines. It was the answer he usually gave Ashfrost. He seemed rather annoyed by it every time she asked.

Ashfrost sighed, "I know, I know. This is irritating for you. I just. . .want you to be able to talk. Especially since you'll be an apprentice tomorrow, it'll make things difficult for you."

Kestrelkit grunted and drew three slashes in the dirt.

"Alright, I'll stop," she smiled and licked the top of his head.

"GIVE IT BACK!" Thornkit yowled as he tumbled with Lilykit.

"NO!" She threw him off of her. "IT'S MINE!"

"NO! I WAS PLAYING WITH IT AND YOU TOOK IT!"

"BUT IT'S MINE AND I NEVER SAID YOU COULD TAKE IT!"

Ashfrost stood up, "Thornkit, Lilykit! Stop! Frostleaf is exhausted and sleeping, you will wake her up!"

Lilykit had a stick in her mouth with which she held on one end. On the other end, Thornkit. They dropped the stick and sat down in shame.

"You don't need to yell at each other like that," she softly growled. "You're siblings and you love each other."

Something kicked Ashfrost's hind legs and she fell down with a yelp. Surprised, she looked around to see Frostleaf vigorously twitching in her sleep.

With wide eyes, she turned to her kits, "Huddle and stay here!" She got up and ran to the other side of the nursery which was the medicine den.

"Flowerstorm," she panted, "I think something's wrong with Frostleaf."

The she-cat was busy laying out washed herbs in the sunlight that seeped through some cracks in the den. She paused and sighed, "Ashfrost, I said the kits are fine."

"What?" Ashfrost flicked her tail in confusion. "Flowerstorm! Frostleaf is vigorously twitching in her sleep."

Flowerstorm shook her head swiftly, "Sorry, I'm just incredibly tired. What about grass sleep?"

Grunting, Ashfrost scruffed the medicine cat and started dragging her to Frostleaf.

"Hey! I can walk by myself!" The medicine cat growled.

"Look!" The queen released Flowerstorm and pointed with her tail at the twitching Frostleaf.

Flowerstorm gasped and bent over Frostleaf, nudging her, "Wake up, Frostleaf!"

With some more nudging and panicking, Frostleaf grunted awake. Her twitching stopped. However, as soon as she tried to stand up, the white queen fell down and started meowing to herself in pain.

"Get you and your kits out of here, Ashfrost."

"Why?"

"Frostleaf is giving birth, that's why!" Flowerstorm huffed. "Now out!"

Ashfrost gathered her kits by surrounding them with her tail and nudged them out of the nursery.

"Come on, let's give Frostleaf some privacy."

Flowerstorm peeked her head out of the nursery, "We can allow three cats in here. Frostleaf has requested Snowberry, Rainfall, and Ashfrost." She then went back to attend to the queen.

Purring with eagerness, Ashfrost followed behind Snowberry and Rainfall into the nursery to see the newly-made mother.

All three sat down a tail-length away to admire and appreciate the kits that Frostleaf and Rainfall had helped bring into LightningClan.

Ashfrost observed that Frostleaf was looking rather fine for a queen who just gave birth. Besides that, there were three bundles beside her.

Flowerstorm flicked her tail, "The brown one is a tom, the dilute tortoiseshell is a she-cat, and the calico is also a she-cat."

Frostleaf purred as her three kits suckled beside her. She looked up at Rainfall, "I want to name the tortie Dapplekit."

"What a pretty name," Rainfall purred. "The tom has to be Shrewkit though."

"Alright," she tilted her head happily. "What about the last one?"

"Sorrelkit," they said at the same time before erupting into laughter.

Ashfrost purred as she admired the new arrivals. But with Sootpelt's recent odd behavior, she couldn't help but think. Would they be safe?

Chapter Sixteen

[image]

Bonus: The above image is Stonestar (except his eyes are green)

Ashfrost was sunbathing outside the nursery entrance as her kits played around her. She reminded herself that she'd have to groom them soon to prepare them for their apprentice ceremony.

They're six moons already, she sighed. *They grow so fast.*

Not only that, she caught sight of five mentors and their apprentices heading towards the entrance. The apprentices were jumping happily amongst each other and looking up at their mentors for approval. It was a rather crazy thought that most of the apprentices were nearly the sizes of their mentors. They all had a spark in them that set them aside from normal Clan cats. Yet Ashfrost couldn't put her claw on it. No doubt, she concluded, that they were off for their warrior assessments.

Thornkit was once again attacking Olivekit and Lilykit. From the fake threats he was yowling at them, Ashfrost saw that they were playing *Clan v. Clan*. Each time, Thornkit was his own Clan, ThornClan, while Lilykit and Olivekit agreed on being LeafClan. Ashfrost was able to observe how heavily they were able to express themselves in this game.

Olivekit would occasionally be the medicine cat. In reality, the young tom had no affliction for being a medicine cat at all. Yet in the game, he seemed to be the one to avoid conflict the most. Lilykit and Olivekit would take turn being leaders. Often, Olivekit was the one to try and reason with "Thornstar" to avoid bloodshed. On the other paw, Lilykit would battle Thornkit.

Lilykit would always pull Olivekit aside before battles to try and strategize a plan to take over ThornClan. Ashfrost couldn't help but notice that her plans always failed because Thornkit was able to

outsmart them.

Thornkit. . . He was the rambunctious one of the group. He was the leader of his very own Clan. Smart enough to outwit LeafClan, and strong enough to "playfully" throw them aside each time they "battled". Sometimes his behavior worried Ashfrost. He always seems to brave and outgoing for his own good. Ashfrost could tell he would be an outspoken, blundering warrior, but a good one at that. She couldn't stifle her purrs as she watched Thornkit pin down Olivekit again.

Then there was Kestrelkit. It was hard to describe his personality, it was difficult to tell he had one because he couldn't speak. But through the claw and dirt communication Ashfrost has had with her silent son, he was rather straightforward and wasn't much of the humorous type. She couldn't help but always worry about his future. How could he be an apprentice without any means of communication? A warrior even. Even worse, what if he was being attacked by a dog or a fox or something of the like and won't be able to vocalize a distress signal of some sort? Often, Ashfrost had to put aside these worries and put her trust in her son, as hard as it was.

"Alright, kits, come here and get your final grooming," Ashfrost purred.

Kestrelkit sat under his mother obediently while she lapped at his fur. Although he was not amused, he saw no point in defying her. Lilykit, Olivekit, and especially Thornkit, were more hesitant in approaching. But with some coaxing and a little bit of gentle arguing, they too were groomed.

Overhead, the clouds grew gray again. The camp was still moist from the recent rain, and a heaviness still hung in the air from Ambersong's supposed murder. As Ashfrost finished lapping at Lilykit, she had a weight in her chest that was telling her to be wary of the future.

The five apprentices waltzed back into camp, their tails held high. They were talking to each other with excitement rippling through their fur. Ashfrost assumed most of them felt confident on how they

did. Fernpaw was the only one not eagerly sharing his predicted warrior name. His tail wasn't as high as the others, but he was still happy to an extent. It was if, as soon as he walked into camp, his mood lowered. Like. . .he had a secret of some sort. Ashfrost shook her head. *Unlikely,* she thought*, he's such a nice, young tom. What has he to hide?*

The mentors all walked into the leader's den to talk about the apprentice's warrior assessment results. Ashfrost strained to hear even a word, however, she was too far away.

Sootpelt was sitting at the base of the Great Boulder, his tail flicking beside him in a content manner. While every part of his posture was the definition of relaxed, the ambitious gleam in his eyes set Ashfrost off guard. Her brother had always been off since birth. Like he was up to something. *Unlike Fernpaw,* she muttered to herself, *he is the type of cat who has something to hide. But what?*

After a long, few moments, Stonestar emerged from his den and leaped onto the Great Boulder. He yawned as if the mentors had disrupted him from a nice, long nap. The leader was smart, Ashfrost admitted, but sometimes he could also be rather lazy.

"May all cats who can hunt for themselves, gather beneath the Great Boulder for a special Clan meeting!"

Ashfrost purred as she followed her kits to the center of the camp. They bounce along side her with excitement. Her little ones were going to be apprentices.

Mousefoot, a recently busy warrior, walked up beside her. He reached his muzzle into her shoulder and exhaled, emitting a small purr of comfort.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't be around much," he grunted when he lifted his head.

"It's not your fault. Sootpelt seems to be assigning you on every patrol," Ashfrost flicked her ear.

"It's almost like he *wants* me away from you."

"I wouldn't be surprised," she shrugged. "He hates me."

Mousefoot wrapped his tail around his paws, "Perhaps that tom will be nice enough to let me take a day off. I could hardly watch the kits grow up. One second they're newborn fluff-balls, another second they're about to be apprentices."

Ashfrost yawned, "And I have to go to warrior duties."

He shouldered her playfully, "Now you get to go on every patrol with me."

She purred, "No thanks, I prefer basking in the sun."

"You sound like an elder!" He rumbled happily.

"Today, we have five new warriors!" Stonestar yowled. "May the five apprentices leap onto the boulder."

The apprentices jumbled over each other to get to the boulder. They would be fiery warriors. Full of energy and ready to aide the Clan.

Once they were settled, Stonestar spoke again, "I, Stonestar, leader of LightningClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

He turned to them, "Fernpaw, Beechpaw, Ratpaw, Bluepaw, and Aspenpaw, do you all promise to uphold the warrior code, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," they all said in unison.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you all your warrior names.

"Fernpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Fernleg. StarClan honors your honesty.

"Beechpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Beechdapple. StarClan honors your determination.

"Ratpaw, from now on, you will be known as Ratfire. StarClan honors your strength.

"Bluepaw, you will be known as Bluesong. StarClan honors your patience.

"And Aspenpaw, you will be known as Aspenshade. StarClan honors your ambition."

"LightningClan, welcome your newest warriors!"

"Fernleg! Beechdapple! Ratfire! Bluesong! Aspenshade!"

He looked at the new warriors, "You may be seated."

"Now, for four new apprentices!"

Stonestar purred and turned to Ashfrost's kits, "Thornkit, Lilykit, Olivekit, and Kestrelkit. You have all reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior names, you all will be known as Thornpaw, Lilypaw, Olivepaw, and Kestrelpaw."

"Thornpaw, your mentor will be Ratfire.

"Lilypaw, your mentor will be Bluesong.

"Olivepaw, your mentor will be Fernleg.

"Kestrelpaw, your mentor will be Mousefoot.

"Welcome our new apprentices!"

"Thornpaw! Lilypaw! Olivepaw! Kestrelpaw!"

Bursts of pride emanated through Ashfrost. Her kits were growing up. She felt so old, yet she was so young. She would get to watch them grow into beautiful warriors. Her trust in Kestrelpaw was no longer forced. It was just *there*.

She couldn't be prouder even as the rain began to pour once more onto the camp.

Chapter Seventeen

A quarter-moon later, things are back to normal. Ashfrost returned to warrior duties with Mousefoot. Occasionally, if she had the time, she would go with him and Kestrelpaw on their training sessions.

The few sessions that she has gone to, Kestrelpaw was making progress. He could hear and listen to instructions just fine and in fact, little communication was required on his side. Watching her son turn into a fine warrior relieved the weight in her chest completely.

Sootpelt called out the names for the noon patrol, "Bouncestep, lead a border patrol with Tigerpaw, Ashfrost, and Beechdapple!"

The tom, who had been crouching over a piece of prey, nodded and gulped it down. He solemnly walked over to the entrance and flicked his tail patiently. His apprentice and the two warriors walked over.

"Ready?" He asked.

Ashfrost nodded.

The patrol made their way over to the border they shared with GloomClan. Tigerpaw walked beside his mentor with a hop in his step. The apprentice was getting older and only a couple more moons away from becoming a warrior. He seemed to be coping really well with the recent loss of his mother, Ambersong. He would be a great warrior.

However, as they neared the border, Bouncestep seemed to slow

down. The act unintentionally forced the patrol to halt.

"Bouncestep?" Beechdapple cleared his throat. "You alright?"

"Yes," the tom was at a complete stop now, "I'm fine."

With the GloomClan border in sight, Bouncestep trotted over to a patch of orchids in the ground. He bent over and neatly nipped the stems of a few, holding them in his mouth as gently as a medicine cat would hold a rare herb. The former deputy then walked over to a large rock embedded in the soil. He layed the orchids in front of the rock and then sat down, his tail curled over his paws. Tigerpaw dragged himself over to his father and sat down next to him.

Beechdapple flicked an ear uncomfortably, "What are they doing?"

It clicked in Ashfrost's head. This was the resting site of Ambersong. They apparently decided to bury her here. "Paying tribute to Ambersong."

"Oh," Beechdapple shuffled his paws, embarrassed that he hadn't known.

After a few more moments, Bouncestep rose and looked back at the patrol, "Sorry about that, let's move on."

As Tigerpaw helped refresh the border, the patrol observed and corrected him when he faulted. For the most part, the apprentice did well.

"Have you noticed how Stonestar hasn't left his den at all the past two days?" Beechdapple started to create small talk.

"He doesn't leave his den very often anyway," Bouncestep shrugged.

"He usually comes out a couple times a day though," Beechdapple pointed out. "I think something's wrong."

Ashfrost frowned, "What could've happened?"

"Could he have lost a life?" Tigerpaw suggested as he finished.

"That had to be it," Beechdapple concluded. "There is literally no other explanation."

"He could be sick," Bouncestep licked a paw.

Beechdapple narrowed his eyes, "Tell me, have you heard any coughing coming from his den?"

Bouncestep stopped mid-lick, "Uh, no."

"He had to have lost a life."

Ashfrost stood up and started walking in the other direction, "Come on, we must be on our way to CloudClan."

Ashfrost detected a strong whiff of CloudClan cats as they approached. They must've sent out a patrol as well. She was shocked to see that the patrol was led by Heronstar. Next to him was Spiderpaw, his apprentice.

"Border patrol?" Heronstar raised an eyebrow.

"Of course," Bouncestep stepped forward. "What else would we be?"

The leader shrugged in a placid manner, "No harm in asking. My Clan is small and vulnerable to attack."

Bouncestep frowned, "Even if your Clan was small, how would a patrol of four take it down?"

"Well," Heronstar smiled. "You are all very strong warriors."

"Thank you," Ashfrost intercepted. "We will be marking and on our way."

"Right, you first," The leader flicked his tail protectively over his apprentice.

As soon as Beechdapple renewed the border, they headed back to camp.

When they returned with a few pieces of prey in their jaws, they

returned to Stonestar on the Great Boulder, yowling angrily at the Clan.

"—deathberries in my prey?" He snapped.

"Deathberries?!" Fernleg whisked around in circles nervously.

"Someone tried to kill you?" Yellowgaze hissed.

"Who?" Sootpelt growled.

Ashfrost dropped her prey in the fresh kill pile before sprinting over to Mousefoot and her kits.

"Care to fill me in?"

"Stonestar announced that he lost a life due to a batch of deathberries in his rabbit the other day," he murmured.

"So Beechdapple was right," Ashfrost flicked her tail nervously.

"Come on!" Stonestar yowled. "Reveal yourself, and I'll let you off with a small punishment."

Ashfrost noticed Nightwing shuffling her paws awkwardly next to her.

She snapped her head to the black and gray she-cat, "Was it you?"

"What? No!" Nightwing's eyes were wide. "I'm just—"

Sootpelt noticed her too, "I knew it! It was Nightwing! Look at how she's shuffling her paws and staring at the ground!"

Stonestar stared at the ground for a second before glaring at the she-cat again.

"You?!"

"No!" Nightwing jumped up. "No, I'd never dream of trying to hurt you!"

"And why would we believe you?" Sootpelt hissed.

"Exactly. Traitor!" Bouncestep growled. "I knew we could never trust you!"

"No!" Tears welled in the she-cat's eyes. "I wouldn't—"

Stonestar called for silence. Then spoke, "We gave you one last chance, Nightwing. Now we will take care of you."

"T-take care of me?" Nightwing stammered. "I swear I didn't do it!"

Flowerstorm burst out of the medicine den, "Sootpelt did it! His—"

"Nonsense!" Stonestar shouted. "Sootpelt is a loyal warrior! Nightwing is the traitor here!"

"But—"

"Who would like to take her to the gorge?" Stonestar snarled.

Bouncestep raised his tail, "I wouldn't hesitate to rid the Clan of a fox-hearted traitor."

Ratfire looked hesitant, but then raised his tail as well, "I v-volunteer."

Ashfrost stared at him, "Your own mother?"

He shrugged, an uncertain gleam in his eyes, "A traitor's a traitor, r-right?"

The she-cat narrowed her eyes.

"Take care of her," Stonestar growled before jumping down the boulder. When he landed, he staggered slightly but sat down like nothing happened.

Bouncestep sprinted and pounced on the betraying she-cat. Nightwing yowled under his weight and scrambled frantically to get out from under him.

"Just accept your fate, traitor!" He snarled. "Ratfire! Scruff her."

The dark cream tom trotted over to his mother and scruffed her,

following Bouncestep out of camp and toward the gorge.

Fernleg ran to the front of camp, "Stonestar! Are you seriously—"

"Don't question me!" Stonestar hissed. "She will end up in the Place of No Stars like she deserves."

"No! Stop this!" Bluesong cried out. "She's innocent!"

"Yes!" Flowerstorm hissed. "It was—"

"Shut up!" Stonestar yowled and arched his back slightly, his tail bushed up in anger. "This is her punishment! She is not innocent!"

Ashfrost had no wish to disobey Stonestar, but she had to make sure Nightwing wasn't killed.

"May I go with them?" She gulped. "I would like nothing more than to. . . to see that t-traitor die."

"Go on, then," Stonestar growled.

Sootpelt whisked his tail to and fro, "Don't let—"

But Ashfrost had already left.

She ran to the edge of the forest to watch. She was still covered by the undergrowth enough to watch without being caught.

Ratfire still had her scruffed and they were by the edge of Shadow's Gorge.

"Alright then, throw her off," Bouncefire said nonchalantly.

Nightwing had stopped struggling at this point. Her eyes were filled with sorrow and fear.

Ashfrost was about to intercept when Ratfire dropped his mother.

"No."

"Excuse me?" Bouncestep widened his eyes.

"I am not killing my mother, an innocent cat," He argued.

"Prove she's innocent," Bouncestep curled his lip.

"The deathberries were apparently implemented into the rabbit two days ago," Ratfire began, "Stonestar said he ate it in the evening. I was with Nightwing at that time of day. She never leaves camp because she can't. I was literally eating an evening meal with her when I noticed Stonestar come out and drag a rabbit into his den."

"How do you know Nightwing didn't put the deathberries into the rabbit before you were with her?"

"Let me remind you, Flowerstorm hides her deadly herbs. No one knows where they are but her. The only way anyone could know their placement was if they asked her and she somehow answered, or was very observant when they were injured," Ratfire pointed out. "She, for a fact, has never been in the medicine den before, right?"

Nightwing nodded fiercely, desperate to get out of the situation alive.

"She could've snuck in!" Bouncestep yowled. "Fine, I'll take care of her!" The black tom stepped over and snagged the she-cat by her neck. She was yowling in pain and in fear.

"P-please! I d-didn't do it!" She screamed.

Ashfrost literally fell out of the bush because she was about to save Nightwing, but stopped herself because Ratfire ran after Bouncestep.

"NO!" Ratfire yowled and leaped at the black tom.

Hissing in surprise, the tom was barrelled over and let go of Nightwing. She fell from his grasp and rolled over to the edge of the gorge. Weak, she layed there. Noticing how close she was to her well deserved death, Bouncestep desperately tried to throw Ratfire off. However, Ratfire was the same size as him, possibly slightly bigger, and put up a big fight.

"She is innocent! Why are you so willing to kill her?" Ratfire hissed.

"I am just trying to protect my Clan from traitors!" Bouncestep growled and kicked Ratfire off, lurching over to Nightwing to shove her off.

Ratfire clamped his jaws over Bouncestep's tail and yanked him backward. Yowling in pain, the black warrior whisked around and lashed out at the cream tom. Ratfire jumped back out of reach and raced over to his mother to save her. Bouncestep was back on his feet and pummelled the young warrior back into the dirt. The constant ruckus and pounding on the ground moved Nightwing slightly closer to the edge. Her ear was now poking off.

Ashfrost couldn't dare to wait and not interfere. A life was at stake, surely it was worth disobeying her leader. She burst out of the bushes, instantly stopping the rivalry between Ratfire and Bouncestep. Nightwing lifted her head up to see the gray blur coming towards her. The rising of her head upset the balance, and with a frantic shriek she tumbled into the gorge. Ashfrost gave one last burst and dived towards the edge, instantly snapping downward in an attempt to save the she-cat.

But to her dismay, her jaws clamped down onto thin air. Nightwing's shrieks pierced the air as her dark gray figure plummeted through the air to her death.

"No!" Ashfrost cried out.

Bouncestep appeared beside her with a grim look on his face, "I would throw you off right now as well, but you're important and loyal to this Clan, so I wouldn't dream of it."

Ashfrost's flanks heaved as she rose to her paws, "This was your fault!"

Bouncestep flicked his ear defensively, "I was just eagerly following orders!"

A loud thump emitted from the gorge. Ashfrost found it hard to swallow.

"Watch," Ashfrost muttered as she headed back to camp. "Watch us

prove that she was innocent."

Ratfire was crouched at the gorge, one paw dangling down as if he could save her still.

And Ashfrost wished she could've. She walked over to Ratfire and dangled her tail over his back, "I'm so sorry."

He sniffed, "You tried to save her. Thank you."

"I failed, though," she murmured.

"Then it was in StarClan's paws," He rose. "I will go down there, I will find one way or another, to retrieve her body and give her a proper burial."

"I will go with you," Ashfrost insisted.

"No, this will be a job for Longwhisker, me, and one of my siblings," Ratfire insisted.

"Alright."

As they left back for camp, Ashfrost once more saw the sight of the dark gray she-cat falling to her death. It was an unfair death. *Goodbye, Nightwing.*

Chapter Eighteen

"I never said to murder her," Sootpelt argued.

"A traitor's a traitor!" Stonestar huffed. "She was given a second chance, and she wasted it."

Treefur cried out in frantic emotion, "You're a murderer, you are no better than she is!"

"I am better than she would ever be!" Stonestar snapped.

"Is that really true?" Treefur narrowed his eyes. "Are you any better than. . .Haunting? Or. . .Sal-inja? For killing her?"

The gray leader's sharp stare dulled as he realized what he had done.

"Great StarClan, what did I do. . ."

Treefur, still angry at his sister's death, took advantage of Stonestar's uncertainty. "You are just like them! A murderous leader who wants nothing more than his own protection!"

"No," Stonestar narrowed his eyes at the ground.

"Yes! What would your brother think?" Treefur kept pressing on. "Think of my mother, Ice!"

That confused Ashfrost. Stonestar had a brother? If so, where was he? And Treefur's mother? Ice?

"I AM NOT LIKE THEM!" Stonestar yowled and bolted over to Treefur. He pounced just tail-lengths away and pinned the light brown tom to the ground.

Treefur grunted under the weight. Stonestar was much heavier and of much bigger build than he.

"Just like them," Treefur croaked.

Sootpelt put his paw on the ground, "I, Sootpelt, deputy of LightningClan, challenge Stonestar for his position as leader!"

Silence reigned over the camp. It was cruel irony. Stonestar, when he was deputy for Nettlestar, challenged Nettlestar for leadership because of Nettlestar's unstable mental condition. Nettlestar had, however, regained ownership of himself. Now, it was Stonestar's deputy who challenged him.

"You want a challenge?" Stonestar eyed the deputy over his back.

"You are clearly unstable and not fit to be a leader. The murder of Nightwing shall forever be on your shoulders. If anything, exile should've been the worst you could give her," Sootpelt flicked his ear. "What do you demand to be the challenge?"

Stonestar ignored the previous message and jumped to the challenge, "A fight. Cause me to lose a life, you win and I will properly resign from the leader's position. If I pin you down for ten seconds, I win, and you will be exiled."

Dawnpaw gaped, "A fight?"

Sharppaw laughed, "It'll be so cool!"

Tigerpaw scuffed his brother on his ear, "It's a fight, mouse-brain! It's not good!"

Olivepaw scuttered next to Ashfrost, "Why are they fighting?"

"Sootpelt thinks Stonestar isn't a good leader, and is going to fight him to prove so."

"That doesn't seem fair," Olivepaw gulped.

"Either way, our Clan is in great danger," the gray warrior sighed to herself.

The two gray toms circled each other in the middle of the camp, each pair of eyes was slitted with menace. Their muscles were

bunched up and ready to be put into action. While Stonestar was of bigger build, his advantage was also his weakness. Sootpelt was a sturdy, lean, and agile tom, and could easily outwit the hefty leader. But once Stonestar had Sootpelt under him, it would be difficult for Sootpelt to escape.

Before the fight started, a rustle by the elder's den caught her ear. She turned to look at the lonely den to see Yang emerge in hopes to watch. The weak, old elder hardly left the den. But no wonder he's watching this event.

Sootpelt striked first to bring a blow to the side of Stonestar's face. The leader, distracted by Yang's arrival, stumbled backwards from the impact. Blood dribbled down his light gray cheek. Not wasting any time, Sootpelt pounced forward to bring the leader down onto his back. His attempt, however, was unsuccessful as Stonestar kicked him back while he was in the air. The dark gray tom thumped on the ground, briefly stunned before standing back up.

Mousefoot sighed, "I'm not sure about this. Something is up about this, I feel like."

"What could possibly be up about this?" Ashfrost flicked her ear. "They're fighting to determine who would be the better leader. It's happened before."

"Exactly," Mousefoot agreed. "But it's almost like it was all-"

A yowl of anger erupted from Stonestar as Sootpelt shoved his claws into the large tom's throat. Ashfrost gasped as she watched blood gurgle from the wound and drip down from his mouth. His green eyes rolled up until all you could see was the whites of his eyes. The leader went limp within seconds.

The camp was silent with shock.

Then, Stonestar's body violently shuddered as he lost a life. Sootpelt now stood to the side, nonchalantly cleaning the blood off his paws. The leader's green eyes rolled back to their normal state, and his throat wound stopped bleeding but didn't heal. The weak, gray tom rose slowly and stared at the ground.

"My last declaration as leader," he croaked. "Is that Sootpelt, is now Sootstar."

Sootpelt (not officially going by the name of Sootstar until he receives his nine lives) flicked his tail, "Decide what you want, become an elder, or leave the Clan."

His head rose and his eyes gazed at his successor with contempt, "I'd rather leave then live with my defeat here."

"Very well, you are no longer welcome in LightningClan," Sootpelt announced. "Aspenshade, Flowerstorm, I would like both of you to accompany me to the Moonbush where I shall receive my nine lives."

Just then, rain sprinkled from the heavy cluster of clouds above. It quickly picked up the pace and every cat was racing to get inside their dens. How convenient the rain's timing was made Ashfrost uneasy. Was this a sign from StarClan that the reign of Sootstar would not be a good one? Or. . .perhaps it was just rain. She sighed and crawled into the warrior's den. She curled up in a tight ball to preserve warmth and wrapped her tail around her. Ashfrost bushed up her tail to keep her warmer and began to snuggle into sleep. She felt the familiar presence of Mousefoot curl up beside her, and instantly she felt safer.

Chapter Nineteen

The rain from the previous night hadn't let off. It was still pouring like all of LionClan. Large, gray, hefty clouds blanketed the sky so that no star could be seen even with super eyesight. Occasionally, but not often, thunder would crackle off in the distance. Most cats stayed inside to avoid the heavy weather. They tried to at least.

Sootpelt, now Sootstar, wasn't letting off on the work. He demanded that patrols be kept up because any Clan could take advantage of them in this weather. He sent out patrols of three to check the borders and to bring back prey. Prey was kept in the warrior's den so it could stay dry and tasty.

Everyone was rather silent from the shock of Stonestar's fall. He was a great leader, then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, he became mentally unstable and lost a battle with a way younger warrior. It was out of his character.

Sootstar seemed rather confident in his ability to lead. His voice was firm and every decision seemed well thought-over. Well, perhaps, except for his decision to make Aspenshade his deputy. She was young and inexperienced. She hadn't even had an apprentice yet, which is something that leaders usually look for in deputies.

"I am going to lead a hunting patrol with Aspenshade and Olivepaw!" The leader announced.

Ashfrost frowned as she peeked out of the entrance to the warrior's den. Both the deputy and the leader on a patrol? With a random apprentice? The she-cat walked out of the den, grunting as she once more became uncomfortable in the falling rain.

"Let me go with," she suggested, feeling protective over her son.

"No," Sootstar twitched his whiskers. "We don't need a large patrol."

"Four isn't large," Ashfrost argued.

"Patrols are three cats or less!" The leader hissed. "Because I said so."

She flattened her ears against her head and crept back into the warrior's den. As she walked back in, she heard Sootstar elect Rainfall to be in charge while the patrol was out. The warrior laid in her nest beside her mate, Mousefoot, and began to groom herself.

"What's wrong?" He queried.

"Sootpe—I mean Sootstar and Aspenshade just took Olivepaw on a hunting patrol," Ashfrost paused her grooming.

The cream tom frowned, "That's odd."

"Just Sootstar being the leader is odd," she shook her head. "I don't like it at all."

"These past few days have been off in general," he observed.

"Exactly," Ashfrost narrowed her eyes.

"I'm sure we're overthinking it," He purred and rested his head on his paws.

Finally content, Ashfrost rested her own head upon her mate's back and happily fell asleep to the comforting feeling of his back rising and falling with each breath.

They both woke to the sound of frantic paw-steps within the camp. She rose her head and walked out. The rain had ceased, but the clouds were still a heavy gray, indicating that rain would be coming later in the day.

"It's Olivepaw!" Sootstar yowled. "I look away for one second and—"

"YOU LOST MY SON???!?!?" Ashfrost growled. "What a LEADER you ARE!"

Mousefoot padded beside her, "Come, we must go look for him!"

All cats were muttering amongst each other. What could've happened? Where could the apprentice be?

"Olivepaw?" An old voice rasped. "What happened?"

Ashfrost whisked around and became face to face with Yang, LightningClan's only elder.

"Olivepaw is missing," Mousefoot fretted. "We're going to go find him."

"Please, let me come with," Yang pleaded. "That young apprentice was my favorite kit to tell stories to."

"Are you sure?" Ashfrost was worried that the old elder may get injured on the rescue mission.

"I may be old," he smiled, "But I'm no weakling."

"Alright, let's go," Mousefoot wasted no time in running off into the forest, Ashfrost and Yang close behind.

They ventured a while into the forest before they caught Olivepaw's scent. It was mingled with Sootstar's and Aspenshade's scent for a long time before Olivepaw's scent branched off in the direction of the gorge.

"Oh, no!" Ashfrost wailed. "What if he fell in the gorge?!"

"Let's hope not," Mousefoot assured her and led the rescue patrol over to the gorge.

To their relief, Olivepaw had not fallen in the gorge, in fact, he was running after a rabbit on the plains before the Thunderpath.

Ashfrost's heart thumped.

The Thunderpath.

"Olivepaw! No!" Ashfrost bolted off to her son, who was very close

to clambering onto the black-stoned path.

Even worse, a monster was roaring towards them from afar. But monsters were fast, Ashfrost knew, and could very well run over Olivepaw.

Somehow, Yang sprinted faster than Ashfrost. His long, skinny legs stretched out and pulled back in in a flurry of moments.

"Olivepaw!" He coughed desperately.

Olivepaw was closing in on the Thunderpath, just a dozen tail-lengths away, and the rabbit right in front of him. Yang was just a few tail-lengths away from diverting Olivepaw, but the elder was slowing down. He may be fast, but his stamina sure wasn't what it used to be.

Then Olivepaw ran onto the Thunderpath and Ashfrost brought herself to a halt. All hope lost. The monster was very close and only a few seconds could pass before her son joined StarClan all too early.

However, a boost of speed appeared in Yang and the elder gave one last yowl before pouncing onto Olivepaw.

Ashfrost didn't see much else.

All she heard was a loud thump as the monster drove right over them.

Chapter Twenty

[image]

Bonus: The above picture is Olivepaw! Sweet little brown boi

This is an important chapter! Read all of it!

Ashfrost felt her heart fall down to her paws. Tears erupted from eyes as she watched the monster run over her son. The roaring filled her eardrums as it passed over the cats. *But wait. . .*

"Wh—," Mousefoot ran over to the Thunderpath, Ashfrost close on his tail.

They both expected to see the limp bodies of their son, Olivepaw, and comrade, Yang. However, the only limp body they saw was the frail, white one of the elder. A light brown lump was laying on the other side of the Thunderpath.

Ashfrost felt her breath escape her, "Go check on Yang, I must see my son."

"Alright," he muttered half to himself and trotted over to Yang.

The Thunderpath was empty and lifeless, giving them the perfect opportunity to cross safely. Ashfrost walked over to her son, her poor, precious, Olivepaw with anxiety in her heart. As she stood over him now, she realized that a dead rabbit lay a little off to the side.

He had caught it, she purred. Then she drew her gaze to his flanks. She couldn't feel herself breathe as she couldn't see his flanks rising and falling.

"No," she crouched down with tears in her eyes, "No, no, no! Olivepaw breathe!"

She hadn't looked close enough. Now that Ashfrost was crouched down beside her son, she noticed something. His flanks were rising and falling, however, in a very shallow manner. A loud purr erupted from the she-cat as she realized her son was alive. The rest of Olivepaw was fine except for his left hind leg. There was a wound welling with blood and in the midst of all the blood, she saw a tip of white. Ashfrost inhaled sharply as she realized the leg was broken.

"It's okay," she rumbled. "You'll be okay now."

She looked over at Mousefoot who was surveying Yang, "How is he?" She called out.

Mousefoot's shoulders heaved with a sigh, he looked at his mate and said, "He was hit by the monster head-on. Several crushed bones and. . . a stopped heart. It looks like he pushed Olivepaw out of the way just in time."

Ashfrost shook with a feeling she couldn't identify. It felt like immense gratitude and possible fear for what could have happened had Yang not sacrificed himself for her son.

Yang sacrificed himself for Olivepaw. Tears streamed down her face as she looked at her son once more.

Mousefoot had dragged Yang off the Thunderpath and padded swiftly over to Olivepaw and Ashfrost.

"How is he?" He asked urgently.

"Alive," Ashfrost purred, now knowing how good it felt to say that word. "However, his hind leg is broken pretty bad."

Mousefoot looked at the wound, "It seems like something Flowerstorm can fix, but he'll be dismayed at a delayed warrior ceremony."

"Of course," she blinked. "Let's get him back home."

And so that was what they did. They carefully put Olivepaw's rabbit on his back and picked him up. Ashfrost had his scruff, Mousefoot

had the end of Olivepaw's spine. They carefully brought him over to camp.

As they entered, sharp gasps escaped from the warriors. Kestrelpaw, Thornpaw, and Lilypaw ran over with wide eyes.

"Is he okay?!" Lilypaw cried out. "What happened?"

Ashfrost couldn't answer because Olivepaw was still in her grasp. She nodded over to the medicine den, telepathically telling Mousefoot that they would drop him off in there.

Flowerstorm walked out of the medicine and her eyes narrowed in large concern, "Bring him in."

After dropping Olivepaw in the medicine den and bringing Yang into camp, Ashfrost was finally ready to answer questions.

Fernleg padded over, "What happened to Olivepaw?!"

"And to Yang?" Yellowgaze questioned.

Ashfrost exhaled, "Olivepaw was chasing a rabbit. Yang had realized first that he was heading toward the Thunderpath and sprinted toward him. A monster was coming and. . . hit Yang and part of Olivepaw's leg. But Yang had, for the most part, pushed Olivepaw out of the way. Mousefoot and I couldn't be more grateful for what Yang gave his life for.

"Yang had lived a long life here, it is time for him to join his family in StarClan."

The Clan was silent. Some were whispering silent prayers and thank yous. Others were staring at the ground in shock. The oldest cat in their Clan, their only elder.

Sootstar huffed, "Get back to work and stop worrying about a dumb old cat and ignorant apprentice."

"Dumb old cat?" Snowberry hissed. "Yang was wiser than us all!"

"Ignorant apprentice?" Ashfrost curled her lip. "Olivepaw is very

careful with his actions!"

Fernleg whisked his tail, "The only dumb and ignorant cat here is you!"

Anger flared through Sootstar's eyes, "I dare you to speak like that to me again."

Fernleg flattened his ears and backed down, fear in his stance and in his eyes. Ashfrost briefly questioned to herself why he would do that.

Ratfire's eyes blazed with anger, "My brother is right. You're a horrible leader who doesn't care about anyone. Perhaps I should challenge you."

"Challenge me?!" Sootstar erupted into laughter. "You could never beat me!"

"Who says I can't?" Ratfire growled.

Sootstar's eyes grew dark with a scary feeling that emitted from him and throughout the camp. Ashfrost shivered with fear.

"Says the Dark Forest," he spoke lowly. "Says the cats that trained me to fight in ways no other cat could. So that I could not be beaten."

The camp was silent in shock and fear.

"Rainfall," Sootstar didn't move his gaze from Ratfire. "Come here, I have an order for you."

The gray warrior sulked over to Sootstar, afraid of his brother.

"My order? Kill Ratfire."

Rainfall's jaw dropped with surprise, "K-kill him?"

"Do I stutter?!" Sootstar hissed. "Kill him!"

Ratfire was backing up now, prepared to run should Rainfall come

after him.

Rainfall paused and looked at the innocent black warrior then back at Sootstar, "No."

"Hm?" Sootstar narrowed his eyes.

Rainfall stood up straight now, "No."

"I thought you'd say that, how could I expect any more of my weak brother?"

Sootstar pounced on Rainfall and dug his claws into the tom's throat. Blood gurgled from Rainfall's mouth and his eyes rolled up. Within seconds, he was limp.

Tears fell down Ashfrost's face, "No!"

"Rainfall!" Frostleaf weeped.

Sootstar peered around, "This is an example of what happens when a cat defies me!"

Even Aspenshade backed up slightly at what Sootstar had done.

"From now on, you will all treat me like a true leader! Each hunting patrol must bring back three pieces of prey, no more, no less, and two pieces will go to me! Listen to these rules and follow them, lest you perish!

1. A hunting patrol of three (no more no less) must catch three pieces of prey (no more no less no matter the season) and will bring me two pieces of prey!

2. Kits will start training at three moons old!

3. Becoming an Elder is no longer an option! Work until you die!

4. A queen can have no more than two kits (from this moment on), any extras shall be slaughtered to control how many mouths we have to feed!

5. Any sign of disobeying or hesitating with an order will result in a wound!"

Nobody spoke.

"Fernleg, Ratfire, come bury this good-for-nothing warrior named Rainfall."

Ashfrost couldn't breathe.

What was happening?!

Epilogue

Ambersong paced worryingly around the pool that gazed down onto LightningClan. Their new leader, Sootstar, was no good. An evil tom with no desire other than to feel powerful and control others. Upon coming to StarClan, she learned that he had been training with the Dark Forest ever since he became an apprentice.

Stonestar was dead now as well, he had been overpowered by a group of rogues. However, after watching his death, he didn't appear in the StarClan welcoming meadow. That was when she pieced together that Stonestar never truly left the behaviors of NightClan and *helped* Sootstar become leader. Stonestar had a slightly softer heart than Sootstar so he wasn't fit for the job.

Mudsplash appeared beside her, "They haven't had a perfectly good leader since Crowstar. Even Nettlestar had a mental breakdown before he died."

"I have been observing them," Gorsestorm appeared as well. "The only other cat I see fit for leadership is Featherwing."

"Yes, yes," Mudsplash agreed. "She would be good."

"Even Snowberry as well," Ambersong suggested.

Hawkstar, the leader before Crowstar, walked beside them, "Featherwing would be better. Snowberry would rely too much on other cat's decisions, while Featherwing would be able to make more on her own. LightningClan hasn't had a female leader in a long time."

"I've been alive since the beginning of your reign, Hawkstar," Yang purred. Yin was sitting beside him. And behind them, Embertuft and Woodfeather, their parents.

"The leader before me was Skystar. A great leader that sadly fell to greencough at the end of his last life. And before Skystar, I believe

was Cedarstar. I do not remember past that."

"Yes, LightningClan needs a female leader," Ambersong agreed.

"Hopefully, they'll survive long enough to have one," Mudsplash worried.